



# Forging Bonds: Part Two

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** The tasks are getting more challenging, and the first one wasn't exactly easy. I can't say that they're not fun though. We're all feeling hopeful that we're going to be able to get the necklace off Kylen and free Coen but getting it is going to be a challenge in itself.

I shouldn't be surprised when the Choosing starts behaving like it never has before, and we're left scrambling to figure out what it means.

And when the results are in, they send us reeling, giving us more questions than answers. Again.

**Total Pages (Source):** 91

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:47 am*

## Chapter One

Coen

I need to check on Neith. She was hurt, not too severely. She probably wasn't even aware that she was bleeding, but I know that it was bad enough that she needed to be healed. I'm sure that Doc has taken care of it. Cam has always been good at that sort of thing. I haven't seen him interact much with Neith, but from what I have seen, it's easy to tell that he feels the same way as I do about her. They all do. Even though I know all of this and I know that Doc has healed her by now, I still need to check on her to make sure that she's okay, for my own peace of mind. Plus, knowing that she's in the castle and so fucking close, is just too tempting. She's my home, she always has been, and right now I am feeling on edge and raw after what I've just been through, I really need to see her.

In other words, I am being a selfish bastard and want to find her for me.

"Where is she though?" I ponder aloud this time.

This castle is truly massive, and I only have a small window of opportunity to find her and spend some time with her and maybe even the guys, before Kylen is going to realize that I've been gone for too long and summon me back in order to make me do some sort of asinine task for him.

I blink stupidly at the floor under my feet, the same floor that is still soaked with my blood, as it begins to glow.

Fucking glow.

Rubbing my eyes, I make sure that I'm not seeing things, because a glowing bloody floor really is out of my realm of normal, and that's saying something because I am nowhere near normal, but even after I have rubbed my eyes, the glow is still there. Reaching out with the little bit of magic I still have access to, my eyebrows rise in surprise when I realize that it's the castle itself making it glow. At least I am pretty sure that it is. The problem is, I don't know why it's glowing.

My eyes widen as I remember that I asked a question out loud. Maybe it was answering my question somehow? Maybe it was telling me that it knows where Neith is?

To be honest, it really wouldn't surprise me if Neith had made friends with the castle. She makes powerful friends wherever she goes. Dimitri was proof of that.

Shit, Dimitri.

That's a whole other can of worms. After experiencing how completely I have been controlled, I am even more convinced that the same thing is happening to him. It's the only thing that really explains how he could treat Neith like he did. He loves her like I do. He would, and has died for her, several times, not that she's aware of that. Then there's Kar and me, we were all family, it has never sat right with me that the way that he treated us switched up so much. I had planned to try to figure it out with Kar, but then I got pulled under Kylen's control, and I didn't think it was safe to contact either of them anymore. Kylen still to this day has no idea that there is a connection between Dimitri and me, hell, no one did, apart from Neith, and until recently, not even the guys.

I had this overwhelming need to keep the guys and Dimitri separate, except it was more than my own desire and was instinctual. Looking back, I now fully believe that

I wasn't supposed to tell them for a reason, and I would be willing to bet that reason had something to do with Neith. If I had introduced Dimitri to the guys back then, I would have introduced Neith as well, and just like with Dimitri, I had the overwhelming urge to keep her secret.

Something bigger than me was at play, I know that now.

Whatever has its claws into Dimitri is stronger than what Kylen is using to control me, a lot fucking stronger. Dimitri is not the kind of supernatural that's easily controlled, and it should technically be impossible.

Over the years though I have come to realize that nothing is impossible.

There's a buzz from under my feet that brings me back into the present. Oh, shit yeah, the castle.

"Can you take me to Neith?" I ask, feeling a bit stupid. The stones beneath my feet glow brighter. I'm going to take that as a yes. As I start to move forward, I catch sight of my extremely bloody clothes and realize that I can't go walking through the castle looking like this. "Wait, I need to change first."

Kylen doesn't want anyone outside of the team to realize what he does to me, so he made me bring a spare change of clothes down here with me, when he had me set it up for him, because as if it's not fucked up enough that he tortures me, he also makes me set up his torture spaces for him.

How nice of him.

I'm going to enjoy making him bleed.

It takes me no time at all to quickly wipe myself down and then change into the clean

clothes, with them on, you would have no idea what happened. I probably should wait longer to heal, but it should only take a few more minutes, and then any sign of the stab wounds and burn marks will be gone. I don't want to wait any longer to go and find Neith. I've already waited over an hour, nearly two, and I'm pretty much healed. I've stopped bleeding at least. Thanks to the suppression that Kylen's control puts on my magic, I heal a lot slower than I should.

I want to see Neith, and the guys too, it would be nice to be around people that actually give a fuck.

I glance down at the still glowing stone, "Okay, I'm ready."

The glow immediately starts to move, skipping from stone to stone, leading me from the cell, and I follow it eagerly.

I'm coming, Love.

It does occur to me that I might be being led into some sort of trap, but honestly, I'm willing to take the risk right now, simply on the off chance that it really is leading me to Neith. I know Neith and the guys, and I'm pretty sure that they're going to be concerned that I wasn't at dinner, because they absolutely would have noticed the way that Kylen treated me in the Choosing trial.

It's late, long after dinner, by the time that I start to recognize some of the hallways, and I frown. I didn't think that it took me that long to heal, especially considering that I'm not technically healed yet, but it must have taken longer than I thought. I should probably be concerned that I seem to have lost a chunk of time, but I really can't be bothered.

I don't see any of the staff around which is probably a good thing because we were told that we weren't allowed to know where Neith's room is, which I was really

fucking pleased about because I wouldn't put it past Kylan to try something to make her comply like he's done to me.

## Page 2

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The castle leads me quickly through the wide corridors, and it's not long until I'm standing outside a set of double doors. I knock quietly, my heart in my throat. It fascinates me how she can make me feel like this after so many years of knowing her.

"Coen?" Neith asks, looking confused for only a moment before she throws herself at me.

My arms wrap around her tightly, as she clings to me. I don't want to risk being seen out here and being told to leave, so I walk into her room with her, the castle closing the door behind me and locking it with magic.

She lifts her head to look up at me, and I smile.

I never feel whole until she's with me, and it's always been that way, before Kylen and all of that shit. She has always been my home, and I hated that there was no way that I could be with her permanently.

She was the main reason that I decided to go into SID, I was unsure for a long time and then everything happened with Dimitri, and she ended up in the clutches of HID, I knew how they were treating her, and I figured that my best bet to help her was to be in SID.

There were other reasons too, I wanted to figure out what the fuck was going on with Dimitri because my best friend would never do the things that he was doing, especially to Neith. Well, Neith is safe, and now I am reasonably sure that I know, or at least have a fairly good idea, what is going on with Dimitri.

I don't know how I'm going to help him, but I will. I have no idea how I'm going to convince everyone that he wasn't in control and someone else was, but I'll figure it out and I know that Neith will help me because as soon as she realizes she's going to see fucking red. The guys think they have seen the darker and more bloody side of Neith, but honestly, they haven't seen anything until they've seen her when someone she cares about is threatened.

She's fucking spectacular.

All thoughts flee my mind as she kisses me, the kiss is fiery and passionate and full of all the things that neither of us has said, even though we both feel it. Her being human would have only set us up for more heartbreak. I would have taken anything, any time that she would give me. I would have given her all of me, hell, I have, and she doesn't even realize it.

Dimitri did too.

Kar said the same as Neith always said and told us we were just going to make shit a thousand times harder for ourselves, but we pointed out that it was too late, we were already in a thousand percent, and we had been from the moment that we laid eyes on her. From the second that she gave us both shit, being her sassy self even though she was beaten, broken, bloody, and near death, from that moment we were hers.

That image of her still haunts me, but that bloodied smile that was screaming with strength and bravery is the one I fell in love with.

Kar admitted that he understood, not in the same way. He has never felt anything but brotherly love for her, but he got it.

I know how the guys feel about her, and quite honestly, I thought I would have a problem with it, so I'm surprised to find that it's the opposite. I like that they care



about her like I do, and I like that she's got them to protect her. I am becoming more and more certain that she is going to need all of the help that she can get, there's a churning feeling in my gut, and my dragon instincts are practically screaming at me.

I need to get this fucking control off me, she needs me, all of us, more than ever.

Having said all of that, although I was willing to have whatever time I could get with her, she always put the brakes on it. Saying things about our mates, or in Dimitri's case, about a supernatural that could keep up with him. She even brought up sex, saying that we can't have it because she's human. She was right, but we made sure to show her the ways that we could enjoy her without threatening her life.

I grin, biting her lip in memory of all the things that we've done. I am suddenly ravenous to have my lips and tongue on an entirely different part of her.

That thought that I had in the dungeon, the one that I pushed away so that Kylen doesn't try to pull it from me, that thought tries to come forward again. I saw her, she wasn't moving and fighting like a human, but then again, she never has.

My mind scatters as her hands weave into my hair and my hands grip her ass, but before I can throw her on the bed and taste her like I want to she pulls back.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she asks, as she wriggles to be put down, and I reluctantly let her go. Her eyes narrow slightly as she watches me. "Are you okay?"

I smile, wanting to reassure her that I'm fine, "I'm okay, don't worry. It's nothing that I can't handle."

Her eyebrow raises, she's not stupid, and she knows me better than anyone. Like the man I am, I decide to avoid her probing gaze by wandering around her room and seeing what I can find to distract her from her question. My eyes quickly land on the

sword that she was wielding, well enough that old Getty would have been incredibly proud of. The cantankerous dragon sword master always did have a soft spot for Neith, although he worked her hard. He would be proud.

As I reach for the sword, Neith says, “Whoa, hang on be careful he doesn’t like . . .” she trails off.

The sword buzzes lightly in my hand, and I grin, Neith’s enchanted sword, “He doesn’t like what?”

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised,” Neith chuckles, her hands on her hips as she watches me closely, far closer than I would like her to right now. However, my dragon is practically purring at her attention. She continues, “He doesn’t allow anyone but the guys and me to touch him. Coen meet Asael, Asael meet Coen.”

My smile widens. I’m not going to lie, it makes me incredibly happy that Asael recognizes my connection to Neith enough that he is allowing me to hold him. I take a few practice swings, ignoring the twinges of pain from the very nearly healed wound in my stomach.

“Why are you in pain?” she asks me sharply.

My eyes snap to her face. I don’t know how I could forget just how observant she is.

I shrug, trying to brush it off, “I’m not.”

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“Coen, don’t even try to lie to me,” she demands.

I love it when she gets all stern with me. I would love it more if I weren’t trying to stop her from committing a murder. Usually, I wouldn’t bother trying to stop her, but in this situation, the consequences would be too great. There are simply too many witnesses.

I shrug, “Your sword is awesome.”

Her eyes narrow, and she moves toward me.

I can’t help it, it’s clear to see how much she cares about me. The wound is moments away from completely disappearing. I only need to distract her for a small while. I place Asael back where I found him and prowl toward her, meeting her halfway.

She smirks, “Oh no. I know that look, don’t try to distract me.”

A rumble begins in my chest, and her eyes flare with heat. I rush at her, tackling her and sending us both soaring toward the bed as I absorb our landing and make sure she doesn’t get hurt. The laughter that explodes out of her makes my smile widen, and I can’t help but commit the sound to my memory, just in case.

As her laughter starts to subside, I kiss her again, her legs wrap around me, and her hands pull me closer. All thoughts of anything but her disappear.

Neith

“I may not be able to have you like I want to, but that doesn’t mean that I can’t taste you,” he says as he pulls back slightly, his eyes flashing with a searing heat.

My only response is a moan as he kisses me deeply before looking down at me, his eyes twinkling, “How much do you like what you're wearing?”

I frown, confused at the seemingly abrupt change in conversation, I answer him anyway and shrug, “I’m not bothered, why?”

I watch in heated fascination as he shifts one of his fingers into a claw and, with expertise, slices straight through my shirt and bra. My nipples pebble as he pauses in his pursuit of getting me naked and spread before him, and his entire focus becomes my boobs. My back arches as his mouth closes around one of my nipples, his tongue swirling around it before he nips gently, and my hips buck. His weight settles above me, and my hands weave into his hair, making him growl a sound that is closer to that of his dragon than that of a man, the vibrations rumble in his chest and create a fantastic sensation, that makes my clit pulse with need.

“Fucking hell, Love,” Coen’s voice his husky with need.

I tug at his shirt, “Off.”

He nips my nipple again before releasing it with a pop and shifting so that he can look at my eyes.

“Love, if I get naked, I’m going to want to be inside you,” his eyes heat. “I’m going to want to feel your pussy clenching around me as I make you scream.” His eyes scan my face, “You’re human, Love.”

I roll my eyes, I know he said that I can’t tell him shit, but I really want to tell him that I’m not actually technically human, although I know him and he puts my safety

above everything, including himself, and would tell me that unless I can say, and prove that I am unequivocally not human he won't risk it. Which, to be fair, is why I haven't taken it any further with anyone, I am still technically human.

"Fine, take your shirt off," I reply. I'm good at compromising.

He smirks, that gorgeous half smile that pulls at the scars on his face and makes me feel things that I shouldn't.

"Yes, ma'am," he replies, as he sits up and whips it over his head, and I'm left staring at the toned and tattooed ridges and planes of his torso.

Fucking hell.

## Chapter Two

Neith

My hands follow the path of my eyes, and his stomach muscles twitch as his head tips back, and he groans. I'm about to pull him back down to me when a new tattoo on his chest catches my eye.

It's not new as in it's just been done, but it is new to me.

It wasn't there the last time that I saw him shirtless, and this isn't the first time we have played. My fingers lift and brush over the scar on his shoulder, surrounded by the outline of a heart made out of my favorite flowers, with the words my always written underneath in my handwriting. I used to write notes to him all the time when I went to the keep, he'd sign his notes to me with Forever, and I would sign mine with Always.

The scar is one I gave him.

It was thanks to training that had gone slightly awry, he didn't move quickly enough, obviously, and I managed to skewer him. We were sparing with dragon blood blades, which are the only weapons that can scar a dragon.

I look up at him, and he shrugs like it's not a big deal. It is though, it really fucking is.

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“My turn to play,” he grins.

He once again leans forward, and his lips meeting mine. I kiss him with every emotion that I am feeling and have always felt for him, and he does the same, that kiss says everything that neither of us has been able to say.

His lips leave mine as they trail across my jaw and down my body, leaving a searing hot path in their wake. He tears my pants and underwear from me in one swift tug, and I have never been more grateful for the flimsiness of leggings. His hands caress from my ankle to my thighs, where they grip tightly, and I watch as he smiles. His fingers pump inside me, as his tongue finds my clit, moving slowly as he gradually builds my need for him, my back arches as my head falls back, and waves of intense pleasure roll through me.

I don't know how he fucking knows, but every time I near the edge of oblivion, he pulls back his lips kissing between my hips and down the inside my thighs, before he finds my clit with his tongue again.

“Coen,” I practically growl when he does it again.

He chuckles, his mouth still buried in my pussy. He lifts his head, glancing up at me, his eyes filled with heat as they flash to those of when he's shifted and back again. You would think that his dragon eyes would scare me, but I could never fear any part of Coen.

My hands thread through his hair, pulling tightly as his fingers pick up speed, my pussy clenching around them as my orgasm builds really fucking quickly. His other

hand trails up my stomach, palming my boob before his fingers find my nipple, and at the same time he pinches my nipple and sucks my clit.

I detonate.

My release consumes me, and Coen's lips are replaced with his fingers as he helps me ride out the last moments of the most explosive orgasm I have ever fucking had in my life.

He crawls up my body, his lips kissing every inch of me as I slowly come down from the epic high that he has just given me. When he gets level with me, he kisses me softly and gently, making me feel how I always feel when he kisses me like this and then he gathers me in his arms, wrapping me up tightly, as I rest my head over his heart, and my tattoo before he pulls the covers over me to keep me warm.

I luxuriate in the feeling of finally being held by him after so long of missing him.

Far sooner than I would have liked, he tenses, his whole body changing from being relaxed, his heartbeat steady, to it pounding like he's running a marathon and a rumble building in his chest.

"What's wrong?" I ask him, as I sit up and look down at him.

His eyes study my face in a way that makes me nervous. It's like he's trying to memorize my features. Almost as if he's worried that he won't see them again. He stands up and I move with him.

Coen

"I want to stay, you have no idea how much I want to stay, Love, but I can't. I don't have a choice," I tell her, kissing her gently and pouring all of the emotions that I'm



feeling into it.

Her eyes flash with such fury that my hands clench to stop myself from reaching for her again. I love that she gets so angry on my behalf, and I know that she would not only torture him, but kill him if she knew the half of what he's done.

Her hands cradle my face and my eyes close, feeling content and at peace for the first time in fuck knows how long.

Resting her forehead on mine, she says, "I've got this, Coen. I'm going to fix it, and then I'm going to enjoy watching you pull him apart."

My eyes flash to my dragon, and I pull her in, holding her closely, "I love that you know that I want to do that."

She chuckles, "Of course I do. I know you."

The command to come back grates on my insides, and I growl, "I've got to go."

She nods and steps back, a heavy frown on her face. I'm hoping that one day I won't have to leave her like this. Maybe even one day I can even promise that I'll be back soon. I can't do that right now, and that kills me.

Leaving her standing in her room is hard, really fucking hard, and the only reason that I manage to walk out of the door is because of the fucking command that's forcing me to do so.

Neith

Watching him go is really fucking hard and I struggle not to go after him, but I know that it wouldn't do any good if I do. He made it clear that he doesn't want to leave,

which means he doesn't have a choice. While I hate that he's leaving when he doesn't want to, I am extremely happy that I got that time with him. It's no secret that I have missed him like crazy.

It's not until the door has closed behind him and I've laid in the bed for a few moments, that I realize that he very successfully distracted me from my question and that he didn't appear to be hurt when he took his shirt off. However, I know Coen. I've been in enough situations with him where we have been in danger, and he has ended up hurt, and I know that he was in pain when he first arrived, which means he distracted me so that he could heal.

It also means that when we finally break the control, if Coen doesn't kill Kylen, then I will.

Slowly, and torturously, and ensuring that he is begging for death for weeks before I actually allow him that mercy.

I sigh and push away my murderous thoughts. Unfortunately, I need to focus on the here and now, and that means I need to get up, shower, and get dressed fully again just in case I get pulled into a task in the middle of the night again. I would say 'well, at least the next task should be with my guys', but there's no way of knowing how the Choosing arranges these things, and there's a big chance that it could be another task with the Draconian team.

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Woohoo.

Rushing through the shower now that I'm exhausted, I struggle to put my clothes on, cursing up a storm when I fall over for the third time and then head back into the room and practically fall onto the bed, I really hope that I get a decent amount of sleep before the next task, I need it.

Dimitri

Idon't know why they've let me watch the Choosing. Maybe they think that it's some sort of treat or something. Maybe someone high up knows something that I don't, but what I'm sure they aren't expecting is the level of torture that I'm experiencing by watching it. One, because of watching Neith in danger, but also because of Coen. My other best friend, I am one hundred percent certain that he's being controlled in a similar way to me, and it makes me murderously angry.

Of course, even that can't make me as angry as watching the soon to be dead cunt deliberately throwing Neith under the bus and endangering her life. It makes me so fucking mad that I very nearly lose control of my hellhound and considering where I am, that would be a very bad thing. I would quickly find myself in a lab instead of in a prison. That massive burst of magic that accompanied my anger though, helped to burn through the last of the poison from the dart that Casimir shot me with when I got arrested, quicker than it usually does, which means I am almost completely free of it.

While I hate that I'm in here and I can't help Neith, there's nothing that I could do about her situation if I were out, and being in here means that Casimir can't reach me. He has no idea that I'm able to push through the poison. It's not supposed to be

possible, and the only reason I can is because of the old woman who visited me in my dreams, and Neith.

Always Neith.

Although it's too little, too late as far as she's concerned.

That doesn't mean that I'm going to stop keeping her safe and trying to make it up to her, for as long as I'm alive. I'm glad that whatever is controlling Coen isn't strong enough to hinder his instincts when it comes to Neith, because it saved her life. I don't know what would have happened if I had watched her die again. The only thing that would have stopped me from going nuclear is that she has died before and come back.

It would not be good if she had died on the broadcast. That would have painted a huge target on her back. Bigger than the one that she already has there.

I'm not surprised at all that she's managed to get an enchanted weapon to be loyal to her, I am however surprised that Betty appears to be becoming one. Although, in a way, it doesn't surprise me at all, she loves that gun, and talks to her like she has always been enchanted, so in a weird way it makes sense that Betty is now enchanted.

She's fucking powerful too, not many people will be aware, but those creatures aren't killed by silver bullets, they can't be killed by any bullets, which means Betty is able to adapt her bullets to kill the creature that she's aiming at. That makes her incredibly dangerous, but also gives me hope. Betty may be the only weapon in the known realms that can kill Casimir.

I've been questioned, that's the first thing that they did when they brought me in, they set me up in a room and brought out the big guns. Fortunately for me, the dart that Casimir shot me with didn't take hold of me as well as it usually does, and after the

initial spike of control, I quickly found that it receded, not completely, watching the cunt try to get Neith killed did that, but thankfully just enough that when they started asking me questions, fully expecting me to fight them or go mute. Instead, I told them everything that they wanted to know.

After the fourth question that they asked, which had absolutely no resistance from me, Ty was brought in instead. Of course, I know who Ty is, he's the head of SID, but more importantly, he's friends with Sully, Draith, and all of them. He's trusted by them. He's also hated by Casimir. He hates all of them. I actually don't know why he didn't deem it important to share it with me, and I didn't care enough to ask, but I did get the impression that there was some shared history between them all.

It wasn't until recently that I realized that he had been trying to recruit Neith from HID in order to keep her safe.

I have a feeling that allowing me to watch the Choosing is Ty's idea. I think that it's part reward for answering any question that they've asked me, but also because he knows that Neith knows me. I'm not stupid, I know that the only reason why they have managed to arrest me and make it stick is because she had the evidence. I must admit that I was proud when I first realized that she had made a copy of the USB that she gave to HID. The first version I destroyed.

She was always smarter than most, and I always knew that there was a high chance that she had a second one. There was a big part of me that was hoping that she would hand it in to the right place or to the right person so that I could be stopped.

Now that the poison is completely out of my system, I'm going to ask to see her. I'm going to be a dick about it too, and refuse to say anything else until they allow me to see her. I haven't told them everything, and there are some things that I know that they will be extremely interested in learning about. It did occur to me to try to get them to listen to me about being controlled, but I know that there's no chance that

they're going to believe me, and quite frankly, I deserve to be in here.

I'm still selfish enough to want to see my Neith though, even if it's only once, I need her to hear my apology and know that I really do mean it. Plus, I haven't seen her in person for a really long fucking time, and I miss her.

Neith

I didn't manage to fall asleep straight away last night despite how exhausted I was, and after another moment of trying, I decided that it wasn't going to work and ended up getting up again. A rummage in the kitchen showed that there was nothing that was going to help me get to sleep and stop my mind from going in circles about Coen.

Wandering around the room to try and exhaust myself enough to sleep, I ended up finding the books that were on the coffee table in front of the fireplace. I had completely forgotten about them.

Reading always makes me sleepy, after a while at least, unless the book is really good, then I just won't sleep at all. Either way, I decided that it would be a good distraction anyway, so with that in mind, I grabbed the cover off the bed, curled up on the couch, and started reading all about realms and creatures, and things that I never knew existed. Eventually, my eyes grew heavy, and I ended up finally falling asleep.

Despite the fact that I fell asleep on the couch, I did manage to get a good amount of sleep. Which I'm incredibly grateful for, I was exhausted. Not just because of the task that I had already done that day, but also because of my visit from Coen.

I got woken up by a knock on the door this morning, and I would be lying if I said that my heart didn't start beating harder thinking that it may be Coen again, and that disappointment didn't dim my smile for a moment when I opened it to find Mabel

instead of him.

She told me that it was my day for a task by myself, and that's how I ended up here.

I'm not exactly sure where here is, but then I guess that's probably going to be a theme running throughout the Choosing. I am somewhat relieved that I'm doing a trial by myself, and not with the Draconian team again. My anger toward Kylen is still burning, and while I'm aware that I'm going to have to face him at some point, and most likely do another trial with him, where he's going to try his best to kill me off, I'm glad it's not today. I will contain my murderous desires by the time that we see him next.

"Focus, I need to focus," I remind myself out loud.

The portal has dropped me into what honestly looks like something out of Indiana Jones. It's a huge stone room, seemingly empty, but my instincts are telling me that's not quite true, so I've stayed where I am, and probably look like I'm just staring off into space.

To be fair, for a moment I was.

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I drop into a crouch as a voice fills the room.

“Your task is simple. Get through the three levels before the timer runs out,” the voice says.

I’m about to ask what timer it’s talking about when a glowing timer similar to the one that I had in Luesidious pops up in front of me. It shows that I have three hours to complete the course. For some reason, I really don’t think that it’s going to be enough time.

Where would the fun be if they gave me plenty of time?

I haven’t called Asael or Betty to me yet because I don’t want to risk dropping them or losing them, if something goes wrong. Besides, I know that if I need them, I can call on them and they will come immediately.

### Chapter Three

Neith

Nothing is happening, and the timer is slowly ticking down. I can’t just stand here and wait, that’s a sure way to make sure that I fail. The disembodied voice didn’t tell me what would happen if I failed, but I’m guessing that it wouldn’t be something good.

With this in mind, I take a step forward. I almost roll my eyes at the predictability when the room starts to shake and shudder, of course, that wouldn’t be the smartest



thing to do right now when I need to pay attention to my surroundings.

I sprint to the edge of the room, my fingers gripping the stones that jut out from the wall, and my feet balancing on the small ledge that stays still while the rest of the floor disappears, and leaves behind a mass of swirling black nothingness. I have no idea what it is, but I get the distinct feeling that it's hungry.

Really fucking hungry.

Which makes sense because it probably doesn't get fed as regularly now that the Choosing isn't happening several times a year. I glance along the wall that I'm clinging so precariously to, and see that the ledge that I'm on is not a continuous thing that leads all the way to the open door on the other side.

Of course it isn't.

Instead, there are big chunks that are missing, and honestly, I'm unsure how the hell I'm supposed to get over to the door. My first priority is moving, and then I can think about how I'm going to get over the gaps when I get there.

I carefully make my way across the wall, relying mostly on the handholds that do at least seem to be along the whole width of the wall. When I get to the first gap, I figure that the only way that I'm going to be able to continue is to use the handholds to get me across the gap. I just hope that the handholds aren't going to crumble like the tiny ledge.

I don't give myself any time to think about it. If I do, I'm going to falter and freak myself out, so instead, I simply swing myself out over the gap and hope that I have enough upper body strength to make it across the gap. I have a feeling that dying by being eaten alive by whatever the thing below me is wouldn't be pleasant.

Mind you, when is being eaten ever pleasant?

I smirk as I reach for the next handhold. Well, I can think of one instance, actually.

The image of Coen's head buried in my pussy flashes through my mind and I barely resist the urge to cross my legs as my clit pulses.

Now is not the time.

Forcing myself to refocus, I swing across until my feet hit a firm or semi-firm ledge. The edge of it begins to crumble, but I quickly move so that I'm no longer perched on the very edge and further along where it's a bit moresolid, and thankfully, it holds. My arms are already starting to ache, and I'm only halfway across the room, and the only reason why I'm halfway across is because I had the forethought to run at an angle toward the wall.

The timer is still in my periphery, slowly ticking away, and quite honestly, I feel like this has already taken far longer than it should have. The thing is that I can't move any faster. In this situation, it would be impossible to move any faster than I already am, and because of this, progress is slow, as I make my way closer and closer to the door.

I'm probably two-thirds across and tasting victory when an inky black tentacle shoots from the depths below and smashes into the wall right in front of me. My fingers dig into the wall, and I feel one of my nails snap as I try not to fall off.

The pain of a snapped fingernail is nothing compared to the pain that awaits me if I fall into the pit below. I wait for a moment as the tentacle disappears back into the gloom beneath me, and when it doesn't immediately strike out again, I cautiously start to move forward. As soon as I get close to the gap again, the tentacle whips out, and I once again find myself clinging on for dear life. This time it doesn't disappear

into the depths, and I watch as it slowly pulls back, gearing up for another attack. I move as quickly as I can backward, instinctively knowing that it's going to strike where I am, and I only just manage to get out of the way in time to miss the strike.

It keeps doing it, and I end up near where I started. How the hell am I going to get to the door now? Not only have I now made no progress at all, but many of the ledges or even the handholds that were there have been destroyed by the tentacle slamming into the wall. I'm stuck where I am, and if I don't come up with a solution soon, then I'm going to end up failing this trial and being eaten by the thing beneath me. The tentacle starts to gear up, pulling backward again, and I see it, the blue dot with a smaller silver dot inside.

I don't believe it.

I fucking read about this creature in the book last night when I couldn't get to sleep. They're guards, and they require payment for passing or they eat you.

What the fuck did it require for payment? I ask myself, I know it wasn't blood, because I remember thinking how strange it was that it wasn't blood, because everything wants blood as payment.

That's it!

I call Asael to me, and squish myself against the wall, holding Asael awkwardly and somewhat precariously in my hands while still holding on to the wall.

## Page 7

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“Alright, Az. I’m going to need you to be super sharp, but not cut me. I need you to cut my hair,” I explain, and he buzzes.

I flick my braid over my shoulder and then put my face against the wall, using my thumb to hold the end of it tightly. I awkwardly move my head to slice some of it off. I only need a few strands. Asael cuts through my hair with ease, and I soon have a small clump in my hand. It’s probably more than I need but I’m not about to get fucking picky with it, I don’t have the fucking time.

I make Asael disappear again so that I can grip the wall properly, and then once I have ensured that I have a strong enough grip with one of my hands, I let go with the other and launch the hair at the tentacle thing.

The writhing pauses, the motion of the tentacle that was starting to come toward me stops, and I hold my breath. There’s a weird, almost purr that freaks me out more than a growl would, and then just as suddenly as the floor disappeared, it’s back, and looking like nothing happened to it. Even the walls where the tentacle hit are back to normal.

I don’t waste any time, and keeping my hand on the wall just in case the floor decides to give way again, I run as fast as I can to the door. Standing on the threshold, I see that beyond the door appears to be a roughly hewn tunnel, clearly part of a cave system. I call Asael back to me in his two-sword form and then step through the door.

Immediately, I am engulfed in darkness, and even when I turn around, I can’t see any light. I walk a few steps backward, and I’m unsurprised when I meet a solid wall with absolutely no door in sight, or rather, feel. I can’t see anything. I am in complete

darkness. Being surrounded by darkness isn't a new thing for me, after all, I go to the Darkness Friend, but whereas that feels comforting, this darkness does not.

It feels threatening.

The voices are muttering in warning, and I know that I am not alone in these tunnels, I can feel it. I can sense the others who are here with me, and I also sense that they are a threat to me.

How the hell am I supposed to get to the door through this maze of tunnels? When I glanced through the door, I saw the offshoots, so I know that it's not a singular tunnel, but then again, that would be pretty easy to deduce anyway, because that would be far too easy.

My tracking gift.

If I can get the map up in my mind like it usually appears, and ask it to stay there, so I don't give away the unusual gift, then I should be able to follow it out of here. It has worked the last couple of times that I have called on it, and I am really hoping that it's going to work this time as well. I need to be really careful, though. I want to keep as much as I can to myself and therefore remain uninteresting, so I am really hoping that it's going to cooperate and only show up in my head.

I have learned that it's far safer that way.

Of course, there isn't another way that I can think of to get out of here quickly, or even just to escape, so that I don't end up dying down in these tunnels and being eaten by whatever it is that stalks them.

There's a skittering sound to my left, and I know that I need to move asap, I do not want to find out what is making that sound, especially since it sounds suspiciously

bug-like.

Yuk. I am not good with bugs.

Calling on my magic, I tell it what I want it to do, and I am so incredibly grateful that it does exactly what I've asked, and that the tracking gift that was once incredibly unreliable has now come when I have asked it to once again. The mental map shows a warren of caves, and it appears to stretch for miles. The good news is that it appears that while the route to the caves is complicated, it's not very long, and my map is lighting it up clearly.

The bad news is that I can assume that the route is short because the danger is very real.

"Duck," the voices warn.

Immediately, I do as they say, there's not even any hesitation or surprise that they are actually talking to me. I don't question it because they have always had my best interests at heart. I duck down, swinging my sword up in an arc. Asael hits resistance for a mere second before it slices through whatever the fuck it is like butter. There's a squealing sound of pain that suddenly cuts off, and I wince as I get coated in warm liquid that I'm assuming is blood. I roll out of the way and only just make it before I hear something thud against the floor.

Within moments, I'm back on my feet as I take off running. My eyes are closed, and I am putting my trust in my magic mental map. There's no point keeping my eyes open because I can't even see my hand in front of my face. I do know that the death of one of the creatures is going to call to the others and piss them off.

I need to move.

Using Asael in his two-sword form, I fully trust my instincts, and it's a mix of them, the voices, and even warning buzzes from Asael, that help me to slicethrough the creatures that attack me, and there are a lot of them. I'm covered in blood and grossness, and I keep having to refocus and reorient myself in the tunnels so that I'm not getting myself lost. I'm moving quickly though, and the creatures seem to know that I'm within feet of the exit into the third and final level because they suddenly double down on their attack.

I get a sudden and very quick image of the creatures coming at me from all angles, but the door is just behind the one that's coming at me from the floor. Taking a gamble, I dive roll over the one on the floor just as my fingers hit the gap that is the door out of this fucking level, something scrapes my leg, and a searing pain shoots up it, but whatever was trying to grasp my leg doesn't manage to fully get hold of it, so I try to put the pain out of my mind as I focus on propelling the rest of my body through the door and rolling out of it.

Popping back up on my feet on the other side of the door, the momentary relief that I felt at getting through the door leaves me in a rush.

No, no, no, no, no.

I can't be back here, anywhere but here.

Spinning around the pain in my leg is not even a blip on my radar. I bang on the wall of the cell behind me.

"Let me out!" I scream.

I want to go back, I want to fight the creatures, I'll lose the Choosing, I don't care, but not in here.

I can't be here.



## Page 8

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It's no good, I know that. There's no door there anymore.

My mind presses in on me as the memories try to push forward. Sinking to the floor of the cell that is so familiar to me, I pull my legs up and wrap my arms around them as I stare at the familiar crack in the dirty and blood-stained stone floor. The memories reach their sharp and jagged claws for me, and I forcefully push them back.

This is a level in the Choosing. I have to calm down.

I force myself to take three deep, calming breaths. Ideally, I should do more, but I don't have it in me.

I need to get out.

I have to get out.

I can't be here.

Not again.

Not again.

Shit, I'm panicking again. Forcing myself to take more calming breaths, I refuse to let any of the words filter through my mind again. Finally feeling slightly more grounded, I stand up. Before I can fully straighten up, the chains clank, and I stare in horror down at the manacles wrapped around my ankles and wrists.

These are the ones that he had specially designed. They're wide, three inches or so, and have hundreds of needle-like spikes on the inside that dig in and make me bleed. Already, there is blood pooling underneath them. Then there's the worst part of them, etched in a deceptively pretty script, is the name Ink on one and Neith on the other. He had been watching me long enough to know that Van called me that at one point, and that I was still fond of it.

Not anymore.

That name is associated with pain, so much pain and death in all manner of ways. Every way that he could think of to kill me, he tried. He was obsessed with my pain and what it could do for his magic.

Through sheer fucking determination, I don't fall into the pit of extreme panic that is trying to pull me under.

I need to get out of here.

Feeling a tiny bit more aware, I look around the cell. If I can find one thing that isn't the same as my memory, then I can use that to anchor me, and I can get out.

I have to get out.

I will get out.

Then I hear it, the sound that shatters all of the delicate calm that I had gathered. The slow, steady footsteps echo through the dark, damp stone corridor that leads past the many cells that are only occupied by the dead and rotting corpses of his previous victims.

My heart pounds in my chest, and I freeze as the humming fills the air. The same

tune, jagged, but upbeat, far too happy for the situation that I'm in.

"Ink darling, what shall we do today?" the voice that haunts my memories and my nightmares taunts. "Maybe we'll go with the saw? Or the blow torch? It's been a while since I used that one. Choices, choices."

I freak out and lose all grip on my calm. Blood drips down my hands and soaks my bare feet as I pull against the manacles, desperately trying to free myself. I'm no longer aware of how I got here, or why I'm here. All I remember is what comes next.

The footsteps get louder, and my panic heightens even more.

"Ink, Ink, Ink," he says happily, before he goes back to humming.

"Trial!" the voices scream at me.

The fact that they've said something to me and they never have before shocks me into stilling, and I frown. They have spoken to me, and this isn't the first time.

Trial.

I'm in the Choosing. This is a trial.

If it's a trial, then it's not real. I need to find the door I need to get the fuck out.

My whole body is shaking with fear, but the footsteps are slowly getting closer. I need to get out.

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I can get out. This is a trial.

Not real, not real, not real, I repeat it over and over again, and it offers me a small amount of grounding. The manacles slip away, clanging to the floor and then disappearing.

Not real.

“The cell door,” the voices order urgently.

I don't question them. I'm holding on to my mind by a thread, any second now my panic is going to pull me back under. I limp my way to the door and pull it open.

Stepping through, I'm no longer in the cell, I'm in my room back at the castle, but the relief doesn't come.

I can still see the cell, smell it, hear his humming, and my own pain-filled screams.

My breath comes out of me in harsh pants, and I call Asael to me. My hands wrap around his hilts. It doesn't ground me as I hoped it would.

The door to my room opens, and I'm vaguely aware of the guys rushing in, but before I can feel any sort of relief, I'm pulled back into my memories. Someone comes at me, and I scream, lifting my swords in defense. I can hear a voice trying to talk to me, it sounds like they're panicking, and there's a distant part of me that knows their panic really matters to me, but that part is quickly drowned out by my panic and my fear.

He steps into view, the saw in his hand, and that's it. I'm lost in my mind.

## Chapter Four

Coen

I saw it. I watched the whole thing. Getting up I leave the room as quietly as I can, walking causally even though it's fucking killing me. I have to get to Neith. She is going to be in a full fucking panic at the moment.

As I step outside the door, I feel a familiar knock on my mind, one that I haven't felt for years.

"Dimitri," I say as I open the door to my mind and allow him in.

A risky move, but my instincts are telling me that it's okay. I carry on walking, I want to run, but I can't risk it, not yet. I can't risk Kylen seeing me and ordering me to tell him where I'm going and why.

"You need to find her," Dimitri says immediately, the panic in his voice making me pause.

That sounds like the old Dimitri.

"Look, I don't have time to fuck around, have you been controlled the whole time?" I ask him bluntly.

"Yes, you?" Dimitri replies, sounding surprised that I have put two and two together.

"Yes, like recognizes like brother," I reply, as I round the corner and finally start to run. The route to her room is seared into my mind.

“I’m going to kill the cunt that pulled her into the Choosing,”Dimitri growls,“I was going to anyway, but now I'm going to make it slow and painful.”

“He’s mine,”I reply bluntly.

Dimitri proves that he is back to the brother and best friend that I remember as he doesn’t even hesitate to reply,“Understood. If you need help disposing of him, just ask.”

My smile is sharp.“Thank you, as always. I’m nearly there.”

“She’s not going to be in good shape,”Dimitri warns.

I growl,“I know. It was too realistic, I couldn’t even find something that wasn’t exactly how it was, and I wasn’t looking at the room through panic. I have no idea how she managed to pull herself out of the panic enough to escape.”

“It’s Neith, she has always been the strongest of us,”Dimitri replies simply.

I grunt in agreement.“Can you hear what’s going on here?”

“Yes,”Dimitri replies.

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“Good. I’m here. I have a feeling it’s going to take both of us.”

“Me too.”

Thank fuck that the castle recognizes me, because it opens the doors immediately. The guys all turn to me, panic, fear, anger, and tears on all of their faces as they drop into defensive stances.

As soon as they see me, they straighten back up.

“We can’t help her,” Evander says with anguish.

River clears his throat, “She can’t hear us. She’s too far into her memories.”

I nod, but I don’t bother replying, there’s no time. Striding through them, what I see, while not unexpected, still breaks my heart. She’s ready for a fight, her swords in her hands, her eyes full of panic and flitting around the room as she sees things that aren’t there. Tears stream down her face, and blood drips onto the floor from her wrists, ankles, and the wound she got when she dived through the door.

“Shit,” Dimitri curses violently. “She’s far worse than I thought.”

I grunt and carry on moving forward, all of my focus on Neith.

“Careful, man, she’s swung the swords at everyone who steps close enough,” Doc warns, his voice sounding broken.

I hear him, but I don't care. From experience, the only way to get through to Neith when she's in this condition is to hold her and speak to her. Fortunately, I'm used to pain, I always have been, but especially now. I stride closer, and she screams and starts swinging. I feel the swords as they slice me, but I don't feel the pain. She is all that matters.

Even with my dragon bound, I'm still quicker than she is, and within moments, I have my arms wrapped around her.

"Asael, she's safe, I promise," I growl to the swords as Neith struggles in my arms.

I have no idea if he will listen to me, he's not my enchanted sword, but this will be a lot easier if he disappears right now.

"Asael?" Dimitri questions his voice, strained.

"Enchanted sword," I reply.

It surprises me when Asael listens and disappears from her hands. Unfortunately, her sword's disappearance makes her panic heighten, and she starts to swing for me using her fists instead.

"Neith, Love," I try, keeping my voice calm, and hoping that the sound of it will bring her out of her panic, but it's no good, she's too far past hearing me.

"We're going to need to sing, it's the only thing that has ever worked to calm her down when she's gotten this bad, and it only ever works when it's both of us," I growl to Dimitri.

"Like old times, my voice will come out with yours, and it will sound like we're both singing together," Dimitri reminds me unnecessarily. "Are you sure me singing is



going to help her?”

“It only ever worked with the two of us singing, brother,” I remind him.

“Okay.”

As I open my mouth to sing Neith’s lullaby, Dimitri’s deep baritone voice sings alongside mine, and I am sure that the guys are going to have questions. It’s obvious that it’s not just my voice. I really couldn’t give a fuck though, the effect it has on Neith is immediate as she stills.

She’s still lost in her mind, but she’s not fighting me anymore. The fists that were hitting me wherever they could moments ago, move to my chest as her fists clench in my shirt tightly. We don’t stop singing, she’s not ready yet.

Finally, she looks up at me.

Her eyes are still unseeing, “Coen, Dimi,” she says with such profound relief that it has a lump forming in my throat as I pull her closer.

“Fuck,” Dimi’s heartbroken voice whispers through my mind.

Her voice rises with panic again, as her fists clench harder in my shirt, “Don’t let him get me.”

“I’ve got you, Love,” I reply, and then go through what I usually do in this situation. “He’s dead, remember, Love? Dimitri and I tore him to pieces, do you remember? You watched us. He paid, we made sure he paid, and he can never hurt you again.”

She smiles, looking so much more vulnerable, “You did. I remember. Dimi made him hurt extra, just for me.”

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“Oh god,” Dimitri whispers. “How can she still speak like that about me, like I deserve it?”

“It’s Neith, she loves you,” I reply. Bluntly adding, “Neith in this state remembers who you were, not who you have been the last few years.”

Of course, Neith being Neith proves me wrong immediately, without even having heard my thoughts.

She frowns, bringing my attention back to her, “Dimitri’s a dick now, but my Dimi, he saved me. You both did. I miss my Dimi.”

The heartbreak in her voice undoes me and completely destroys Dimitri. His breath hitches as he chokes on the emotion that she’s just invoked in him. She still cares and that will be a fucking sucker punch to his fucking soul.

“Dimitri,” I growl, gaining his attention. “I’ve got her, and I will help you, I fucking promise. But right now, I need to concentrate on our Neith.”

“Keep her safe, brother,” Dimitri immediately replies.

“Always,” I promise. “It’s good to have you back, brother.”

With that, my mind is suddenly my own again.

My eyes refocus on Neith, and I see her smile softly, her eyes drifting closed before she sleepily opens them again.

Thank fuck the worst is over, she's out of her memories, but not quite back to the present.

"Bye, Dimi," she mutters, barely above a whisper.

I grin, "You sneaky little Love."

She lazily shrugs, the smile stretching slightly, "I'm tired."

I hold her weight as she drifts into a healing sleep. Lifting her up, I stride over to the bed and carefully place her on top. Covering her with her covers and making sure that her booted feet are on the towel that she's got there. She would kill me if I didn't.

Bending over, I gently kiss her forehead, "Sweet dreams, Love."

"Love you, Coen," she whispers sleepily.

My eyes fill with tears, this was always the only time when she would say the words, but the fact she has now, even though she is aware of the here and now again, means so much fucking more.

"I love you too, Neith," I reply quietly.

I watch her for a few moments, my back to the guys as I make sure that she really is in a healing sleep and not about to spiral into another panic attack, like she has done occasionally in the past.

I want nothing more than to climb into bed with her, as Dimitri and I always have done after she has had a panic attack. We'd hold her for as long as she needed us to. I can't do that right now though. I need to get back to Kylen before he realizes that I'm gone and questions me. I cannot allow him to pull Neith's secrets out of me. I will die

before I allow that to happen.

Finally, I face the guys.

They all look like they've been through the ringer, with tear-streaked faces and still extremely tense. It makes me happy, I now know without a single doubt in my mind that they care about Neith in the same way that I do. She's safe.

"Is she okay?" River asks, his voice soft, his eyes on Neith, and his hands shaking.

I don't hesitate as I open my arms, just like I always would when River was on the edge. As soon as my mind catches up to my actions, I wince and start to put my arms down. He's not going to still want comfort from me.

"Oh no, you don't, you offered the hug. I'm taking it," River demands, making me smile.

He hugs me tightly, and I return it.

When he steps back, I say, "She's okay now. Do not leave her alone, I mean it. We always stayed with her when this happened. She might have nightmares, and in case you haven't figured it out yet, Neith doesn't like to sleep alone anyway."

I feel the command tugging at me and growl. "I have to go."

"You don't want to, do you?" Raiden asks me, studying me closely.

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“If I had a choice, I would never leave her side again,” I surprise myself by being able to answer honestly.

“We’re on it, man,” Ransom says.

I nod as I head toward the door, the command getting stronger.

“It’s her story to tell and it’s fucking horrifying, you only caught a glimpse. Don’t fucking ask her about it,” I order.

“We won’t,” Griff replies, his voice tight, but he’s already by her side, sweeping her hair off her face. I smile.

I search the room, and see Doc staring at her wrists. I know why he’s hesitating, he wants her permission to heal her.

“Doc, heal her ankles and wrists, if she wakes up and sees them, then she will absolutely spiral again, and I’m not sure I’ll be able to come back,” I explain. “She’s also got an injury on her leg that needs healing.”

Doc immediately nods and gently sets his hands on her.

The command screams at me, and I am forced to jog toward the door, pulling it open. I glance back to see that Neith is surrounded by them all, their eyes on her, watching over her, and keeping her safe. River moves her so she’s lying on his chest as Raiden moves behind her, holding her tightly. A pang of longing goes through me. I would love to stay, to be in that room with all of them, looking after the woman that we

love, and make no mistake, they may not be able to put it into words yet, but they love her.

As the door slams behind me, I rest my hand on it.

“Castle, protect the room and don’t let anyone in until Neith is ready,” I say.

The doors buzz underneath my touch, and then I feel a swell of magic that layers over the door and lets me know that it’s taking me seriously.

River

“That was fucking terrifying,” I mutter as I watch her breathe, her head resting on my chest.

“It really was,” Doc agrees, still sitting on the floor, her hand in his.

“I don’t think I have ever felt that helpless,” Griff admits. “I fucking hated it.

Raiden nods in agreement, “Thank fuck for Coen.”

Evander’s eyebrows dip down into a frown. “Did you see how he reacted to Asael slicing him?”

“He didn’t,” Reed replies, his worry evident in his eyes. “To be able to endure that without even flinching, says that he’s experienced some pretty fucking traumatic stuff, and most likely still is experiencing it.”

“What Coen did was fucking insane,” I reply. “And if Coen doesn’t kill Kylen then I fucking will. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that he is the one who’s responsible for Coen’s ability to ignore severe pain.”

“Agreed,” Van says. “I have no idea what we would have done if he hadn’t seen the trial and realized what was going to happen.”

“Nothing,” Reed says, not sounding very pleased about it at all. “We wouldn’t have been able to do anything. There is no way that we would have known that singing calmed her, and even if we did happen to stumble across it, there’s absolutely no way that we could have sung that song. It was specific and designed for her. I think they made it up for her.”

“They?” Griff questions.

I raise my eyebrows. I know that Griff heard it too. We all did, it was unmistakable. We may not have been around Coen for a long time, but there is no way that his voice could have warped that much. I mean, we have had some conversations with him, and despite that, it was very obvious that it wasn’t just one voice, it was two.

“There were definitely two voices,” Ransom agrees. “Coen obviously knew it before he started singing as well, as he wasn’t shocked or anything when he sang, and it wasn’t just his voice that came out.”

“Which means that he knew who it was,” Evander points out, which I thought was pretty obvious.

“Neith told us exactly who it was,” I say, when they all just look at me expectantly. I add, “Dimitri. She was talking to both of them. She knew that he was there too.”

Raiden’s eyes widen, “Shit you’re right. I was so focused on the effect that it was having at calming Neith down, that I didn’t really think too hard about anything else.”

“But how?” I ask with a frown, keeping my voice quiet since Neith is right here on my chest, and the last thing that I want to do is to wake her up.

Everyone falls quiet as they try to think of some way that what we just witnessed was possible.



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“You know,” Griff starts thoughtfully, “it does mean that Coen and Dimitri were far closer than we ever thought they could be. It was a shock when Neith mentioned them together, but this shows that it was more than just a passing thing. They were close. Coen wasn’t shocked or even upset to be sharing his head with Dimitri.”

“That’s it,” Ransom says, and then looks at Griff, “sorry, I agree that you’re right, but you saying sharing his head made me remember the vamp that Neith killed outside Naimh’s place in Ireland. You guys remember?”

I nod, “Yeah. He spoke through the decapitated vampire it was really fucking disturbing.”

Ransom smiles slightly, “Exactly, he spoke through the vampire. It’s reasonable to assume that he can talk into people’s minds. I would imagine that it has to be someone that he knows in order to do it over a long distance, but then again, we know absolutely nothing about Hellhounds, so it could just be something that he can do.”

“Wow,” Doc mutters.

His sentiment pretty much sums up what all of us are thinking, or at least what I’m assuming they are thinking, because I am.

“That means that Dimitri still cares enough about Neith that he saw the trial and immediately knew that she was going to struggle, so he did something about it,” Ransom says.

I raise my eyebrows, “Yeah, you’re right. That hadn’t occurred to me, but then again,

after the way that he spoke to her through the vamp, I never would have thought that he was capable of caring about her.”

“We all know that he used to care about her though,” Van points out.

“He clearly still does,” Doc reasons. Frowning, he adds, “But I don’t know what it means. We know that he’s seriously hurt Neith. Maybe not physically, but certainly emotionally and verbally.”

“I’m not sure, but I get the feeling that Coen is going to be the key to understanding that more,” Raiden muses thoughtfully.

“We’re not going to be able to ask him about it until he’s free of Kylen,” Van points out.

“Definitely,” Reed agrees. “We’re not going to be able to ask Neith either, not unless she brings it up. There is a really strong chance that she’s not going to remember any of this.”

“Yeah, you’re right. She was so deep into a panic attack that she didn’t even realize where she was,” Ransom says.

## Chapter Five

### River

We’re all silent for a moment.

“It’s interesting that Asael listened to Coen,” Raiden muses quietly.

“I think that there is a lot about this situation that is interesting,” Griff agrees

thoughtfully.

“We should probably try to get some sleep. We have no idea what task is next. I really wish Neith got a few days to recover, but she’s not going to get that,” I frown.

Raiden frowns slightly, “That might be better to be honest. Whenever I have a massive panic attack, I like to be busy rather than allowing myself time to think about it. Staying busy and keeping my mind clear almost helps me to rest. I know that doesn’t make much sense.”

“I get that,” Reed agrees. “It gives you less time to think about it and more time for your brain to pack it away and heal a bit more gently without it being forced in your face all the time. I’m entirely unsure whether it’s healthy for you or not, but I’ve done it, and I will do it again.”

“Well, then I hope that Neith views it in the same way that you guys do,” Evander says, a worried frown on his face.

“If not then we will just have to be there in the best way that we can be despite the fact that we’re going through the Choosing,” Griff says firmly as if he’s daring us to argue with him, or maybe he’s daring the universe to argue because he knows that we won’t.

“Agreed,” we all reply.

My mind is spinning, and although I know that I should be able to get some sleep, and although we’ve all agreed that we should go to sleep, it’s a long time before any of us actually do. All of us keep watch over our Neith to make sure that she really is okay and not going to wake up with a nightmare.

None of us is new to panic attacks, all of us experience them in some form, although

Doc and Raiden are the only ones who still experience them with some regularity. None of us has seen a panic attack that is quite like Neith's, and although we are all curious about what happened, we can guess from what we witnessed in Neith's last trial, and I think the only reason why we are remaining calm is because Neith needs us to.

And Coen said that Dimitri and he tore the fucker apart. So, he's very much dead and no longer a threat to Neith.

Thank fuck.

Eventually, we all drift off, but judging from the amount of shuffling and sighs that I hear through the night, I don't think any of us sleep very well.

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Neith

Waking up surrounded by my guys is amazing, and I revel in the feel of having their arms wrapped around me.

Opening my mouth, Griff's eyes connect with mine, as he says gently, "Don't you dare apologize for any of that."

My eyes widen slightly, "How the fuck did you know that I was going to apologize?"

"We've all been there," Doc replies. He leans forward and kisses my head gently. "We get it, we all understand what it's like, and we've all felt the need to apologize."

I frown, "While I'm glad that you understand, I also hate that you understand."

After a moment of silence, River asks, "Do you want to talk about it, or pretend it never happened until you're ready to talk about it?"

I practically melt at the level of understanding that he's showing me right now, and the fact that none of them are looking at me with any sort of expectation of an explanation. I know that Coen most likely told them not to ask questions, but I still appreciate the fact that they're listening to Coen's advice and not asking questions anyway.

Dimitri.

I don't remember much. It's like looking back at a dream, or rather, a nightmare, and

everything is just hazy, but I do know that nothing can bring me out of a panic attack that bad, apart from Coen and Dimitri singing to me, and I remember him speaking through Coen. I need to talk to Coen about it, because he wasn't freaked out or pissed and allowed Dimitri to share his headspace. Coen knows how to kick Dimitri out. Dimitri taught both Coen and me how to do it, which is why he's never been able to get in my head. Coen knows that, and yet, he didn't kick him out, which tells me that something may have changed.

Hope soars, and I viciously push it back down.

It's more likely that Coen used some sort of threat, or something, in order to get Dimitri to help me. It's not likely that he wanted to help me of his own accord. Not that I have any idea how Coen would be able to do that, especially when he's nowhere near Dimitri.

The problem with that theory is that I'm not likely to get a chance to talk to Coen and find out exactly what happened any time soon, and to be honest my nerves and my emotional wellbeing is currently shot to shit thanks to the humongous panic attack. I feel like I have been through a wrestling match with a fucking t-rex, and a few of his friends, underwater, and somehow on fire too.

I have no idea how that would work, but that's the most accurate description I have of what I feel like right now.

"Neith?" Reed asks, looking at me in concern.

"Shit sorry, I was in my own world," I look back at River. "If it's okay, can we do the second option? The pretend it didn't happen until I'm ready to talk about it option?"

"Of course," Doc replies with an understanding smile. He then promptly changes the subject, "Evander, Griff, and Ransom have all gone to get us some breakfast and

coffee. We're hoping that they get back before we're pulled into a task. We have no idea whose it will be today."

I nod, my eyebrows draw down slightly as I ask, "Shouldn't you guys get back to your own rooms. You're not supposed to be in here."

"One, you needed us, so we're here," Raiden says, his hand squeezing mine. He adds, "And just in case you hadn't realized, no rule or consequence would ever stop us from being there for you when you need us."

"He's right," Griff replies as he walks back into the room with the others, all three of them carrying trays of food.

"Thank you," I reply softly, because I have no idea what else to say to that apart from thank you.

"I think that the staff here must somehow just know things, or maybe the castle shares things with them," Ransom adds, as he places the tray of mugs on the side and immediately hands me one.

"You're my favorite for today," I tease with a smile, and his eyes light up as he grins proudly and sticks his middle finger up at the others.

They all promptly tell him to fuck off and then conversation turns back to what he said.

"What do you mean?" River asks, handing me a pastry that has chocolate in it.

I immediately stuff it in my mouth, I'm so fucking hungry. That's not really surprising though, I always am after I have a panic attack and that was a big fucking panic attack. I practically inhale the first one, and River immediately hands me

another one, smiling proudly when I take it and carry on eating.

“Mabel and a couple of the other staff members were waiting outside of the dining hall or whatever it’s called, for us with the trays of food,” Van explains.

“Either they knew, or they watched it too and realized that there was no way that we would leave you all by yourself after that, and decided that we would probably want to eat in here,” Raiden points out.

“Yeah, that’s true. She did say that there was no need for the Draconian team to know where your room was. Which means she knows that we’re in here,” Griff adds.

“How many days have we got left now?” I ask. “So much has happened, and what with getting woken up in the middle of the night for tasks and all of that, I have no idea what day it is or how long we have been here for.”



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“Erm, that’s a really good question,” Griff replies with a slight frown as he tries to work it out, and since none of the others are immediately chiming in with the right answer, I’m going to assume that none of us have any idea what day it is and how long we have been here.

Doc frowns, “I think we’ve been here for two days, this is the third day, so we’ve got two trials left after today, and then Saturday is a rest day, and then it’s judgement day, and the scroll telling us that Neith is going to be on our team.”

“And whatever else comes with that, Ty said more magic, which is pretty fucking cool,” River grins.

“I love how confident you all are that I’m going to be on your team,” I say.

Immediately, I have seven guys frowning at me.

“You don’t think you will be?” Griff asks curiously, his head tilted slightly to the side.

I think about my answer carefully, wanting to make sure that I word it right, “I hope that I will be, but Kylen has proven himself to be more powerful than he should be, look at the way that he’s able to control Coen. You guys know Coen, surely you know that he’s stronger than he should be?”

They share a look, and I know that they all agree with me.

“Yeah, you’re right, and that’s why it’s so worrying that Kylen has managed to get

him under his control. I agree with that, but he won't be able to do that with you," Evander says.

"One, you don't know that, and two, I'm not actually worried about that, I don't think that Kylen has any desire to control me," I reply, as my mind moves back to the first task and how he behaved.

"What do you mean?" Raiden asks curiously.

"I think he wants to kill me," I reply bluntly. "I am also not entirely certain that it was his idea."

"You mean that someone has got to him and is using him to try to kill you?" Reed frowns, anger flashing in his eyes.

I nod, "Yeah. To me, it's the only thing that really makes sense. He's not trying to get me on his team, in fact, by not helping me in the first task, he pretty much ensured that the scroll wasn't going to put me on his team, and he shouted and told the creature where I was."

"Unfortunately, I agree with you," River replies. "It does make sense, and let's face it, we know that Kylen is capable of some horrific things. If someone offered him something that he wanted and all he had to do was to kill the human, who was important to the team that he has a long-standing rivalry with, then yeah, I totally think that he would do it."

"He's supposed to protect supernaturals," Griff frowns.

"He is, but he has always had a cruel streak a mile wide, and it would appear that's turned into downright evil," Doc points out.

“We need to keep you safe and make sure that you are never left alone with them,” Ransom says, his eyes running over me like I might disappear at any moment.

“That would be great, but we’re in the Choosing and there’s a really big possibility that I am going to end up on a trial with them again in the next few days,” I point out, making their frowns deepen even more. “I am really good at staying alive, even when I technically die.”

“You can’t die, in front of all of the supernaturals watching, hell you can’t die just in front of Kylen, that would be a really bad idea. It would put you in more danger than you are already in,” Ransom says.

I frown, “Shit yeah, you’re right. I know that, it just slipped my mind.”

“That’s okay, there’s been a lot going on,” Reed reassures me.

“Surely he wouldn’t try to kill me during a trial, when we’re being filmed right?” I ask. “There are rules against it and that would be a really fucking stupid thing to do.”

“She’s right,” Doc agrees. “It would be much easier to kill her off here while she’s at the castle and we aren’t being filmed. Also, while she is separated from us. He knows that her room is separate from ours, and that at some point we’re going to go on a trail and she’s most likely going to be left here without us.”

“Fuck,” Van curses, running his hand through his hair.

“I have Castle, so I might even be more protected here than I am anywhere else. It wouldn’t let anything happen to me and I’m pretty sure that it can do some damage if it wants to,” I try to reassure them.

“That’s true, but I still don’t like it,” Raiden says, with a heavy frown.

“Don’t forget Mabel and the others, they’re a lot stronger than they look and part of their job is to make sure that the contestants remain safe in the castle, if I mention to her that I’m not, then I’m sure she’d have more guards around, like at dinner,” I add.

“Yeah, definitely do that, and if you’re okay with it I think it might be a good idea for us to stay with you for the rest of the time that we’re here,” Evander suggests looking at me.

“I am completely okay with that, but I think that it might be a better idea if I stay in the room with you guys instead, there’s more space there for everyone, and we need to make sure that we’re getting enough rest between trials,” I reply.

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Van nods in agreement and then frowns again, “Wait, what about Coen?”

“What about him?” Griff asks curiously so that I don’t have to.

“Well, what if he comes to find Neith again and she’s not here?” Van asks.

I shrug, “He’s not stupid. He’ll assume I’m with you guys and if he still wants to find me then he’ll ask castle to help him do it, in fact,” I look around the room, “Castle, if Coen turns up to look for me can you please direct him to the guy’s rooms?”

The fireplace flares to life in agreement and I smile.

“That’s a yes,” Raiden points out.

“So, it’s settled then,” Van says.

I nod, “Sure. I have no desire to be myself after all of that anyway, so I most likely would have ended up in your rooms.”

“We’ll move your stuff over after we’ve eaten,” Griff says.

“Okay. Don’t let me forget the stuff out of the bathroom, it smells amazing, and I want to bring it with me,” I grin, and the guys all smile and nod.

After that the conversation moves on to other things, although there is an underlying tension throughout all of the conversations, since we know that any second now we could get pulled into another trial.

“Do you think that the Choosing is giving you some time this morning to recover?”  
River asks curiously.

I shrug, “I suppose it’s possible.”

There’s a knock at the door and I reluctantly get up from the pile of men on my bed. That sounds way dirtier than it actually is and if I’m being honest I would have preferred it if it was the dirty version.

Unfortunately, we’re all dressed.

“Be careful,” Raiden frowns.

I look back over my shoulder, “Don’t worry Castle would warn me if it was someone unpleasant,” I reply with confidence because I know that he would.

“You mean, Kylen,” Van says.

“Well yeah,” I reply. Pulling open the door I smile in greeting when I see Mabel standing outside, wringing her hands and studying me worriedly. I ask as I usher her into the room, “Is everything okay?”

She smiles, “Yes, I was worried about you.”

I glance away feeling slightly embarrassed, “Yeah, I really wish that wasn’t shown to every supernatural in all the realms.”

“Hey now,” she says firmly, and my gaze snaps back to her. “I will have absolutely none of that. All I saw, all anyone saw, was an incredibly strong woman, who despite the distress she was put under still managed to pass the task that the Choosing had given her. I have watched many Choosing’s and many have not survived the second

level in that particular task, and as far as I have seen no one has had a final level quite as traumatic as that one.”

“Really?” I ask. “You’re not just saying that to make me feel better?”

“No. I don’t do that sort of thing,” Mabel replies in a very matter of fact kind of way that makes me like her even more.

I glance over at the guys, and find them all nodding in agreement with her sentiment. As much as I still hate that a weakness, and actually more than that, a deeply traumatic piece of my past was exposed to possibly millions of supernaturals, I have to admit that there is fuck all that I can do about it and instead of worrying about it, or carrying it with me, I’m going to let it go.

## Chapter Six

Neith

I force myself to think back about what they actually saw, and I realize that it didn’t really expose much. My secret Darkness Friend is still a secret, and nothing else was seen. From an outside perspective, it just shows that at some point, I was imprisoned and that the guy was a psycho. My memories try to push forward, and instead of allowing them to do so, I pull the memory of Coen and Dimitri pulling him apart, and killing him slowly and painfully.

That makes me smile.

“Thank you, Mabel,” I say sincerely.

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She nods and then frowns slightly, “Unfortunately, you don’t get the day off from a trial. The Choosing has to last for seven days, five trial days, a rest day, and then the scroll day.”

“That’s okay,” Reed says. “We didn’t expect to get the day off.”

“We’re just extremely grateful that we managed to start the day slowly and not get immediately thrown into another trial,” Doc adds with a smile.

“Even if that wasn’t intentionally done by the Choosing, we’re still grateful,” Ransom says with a smile.

Mabel’s eyebrows rise slightly, “Oh, it was definitely intentionally done by the Choosing. Which is curious, since it has never done that before,” her gaze runs over me. “There must be something extremely special about you.”

“Yep, we certainly think so,” Evander replies without skipping a beat.

Mabel chuckles, “I can see that.” Becoming serious again, she says, looking at the guys, she continues, “I came to tell you that it’s your trial day, and I imagine that you will be getting pulled in fairly soon.” Looking at me, she says, “It’s also another trial day for you as well.”

I tense.

I can’t help it. I knew that there was a chance that I could have another trial, but having one directly after the last one that affected me so deeply was not something



that I was prepared for.

Arms wrap around my waist, and I lean back into the chest of Ransom as he holds me tightly, calming me in a way that he probably doesn't realize and I don't fully understand.

"It's not going to be the same thing," he reassures me quietly.

Griff moves into my eyeline, "He's right. The Choosing wouldn't do two of the same trials, we know that it doesn't do that, and I think that the fact that it has given you as much of a break as it has goes to show that it in some way cares, and won't put you through that again."

I study his expression, before he moves closer and still wrapped in Ransom's arm's I pretty much headbutt Griff's chest making him chuckle as he drops a kiss on top of my head. Glancing up at him again, his big palm cradles my jaw, and Ransom presses closer against my back, his lips moving to my neck, as Griff's lips meet mine in a soft, but heated kiss. The sensation of having two sets of lips on me immediately sets me on fire, my thighs clench as my clit pulses and I forget everything around me, and sink into them.

With surprising ease, they turn me and switch positions so that Griff is kissing my neck, and Ransom kisses me with such fire, and emotion, that my hands grip his shirt as I hold on for dear life.

Fuck me, these men can kiss.

A throat clearing pulls me out of my Griff and Ransom bubble, as Evander says in a heated voice, "Er, guys, as much as we're loving this, I'm not sure Mabel needs to see it."

I pull back as far as I can since I am still wedged between them, as my eyes widen, oh shit I forgot about Mabel.

“Feel better?” Ransom questions looking amused at my shocked expression.

I nod, and then bury my head in his shoulder, while I try to gain some composure and Griff tightens his arms around me from behind his chuckles vibrating through me and not really helping the situation.

After a few moments of soaking in their comfort, I stand back up straight, and they both move so that I can once again see Mabel, who although now looks fairly amused, has got that same worried frown that she had when I first opened the door.

“Sorry, Mabel,” I reply with a slight wince.

She chuckles, and waves her hand dismissively, “Ah, don’t worry about it, it’s nothing I haven’t seen before.” Becoming serious she adds, “Are you okay?”

“I’m good now,” I reply, offering her a smile.

I kind of mean what I say. Although I am still incredibly nervous, I don’t think that I could go through that again. It felt so real. I couldn’t find any part of it that showed that it was an illusion, like you would usually find in one. I think that’s what made me lose it completely. If it wasn’t for the voices and their instructions, I don’t know what would have happened. I do know that if I had experienced anything else, if I had seen his face, then I would not be functioning very well now, even with Dimitri and Coen’s help. I would be pretty much useless for a good few days. If it had gotten that far though, no amount of shouting from the voices would have pulled me out of it, and I would have died. I would have come back, I would have lost the Choosing and who knows what that would entail.

Once again, the voices saved my life, possibly in more ways than I am aware of.

They're back to their usual murmur now, and I get the feeling that it's only in rare circumstances that they will actually talk to me, but I am so incredibly grateful that they decided to when they did.

"I shouldn't tell you this," Mabel starts, pulling me out of my thoughts as I refocus on her. She continues, "But, it won't be like your last trial. It's more physical than the last one."

The tension drains out of me, and I smile gratefully, "Thank you. I don't think I would have been able to get through today if you hadn't told me that. I really appreciate it."

"Of course," she replies. "I'll have some of the good snacks ready in your room for after the trial."

My eyes well at the kindness that she's showing me, "Thanks Mabel."

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“Of course,” she replies, and then clears her throat and straightens her skirts. “Now, enough of this. You kick ass today, you hear me.”

“I hear you,” I grin.

She nods sharply and then heads back out of the room, Castle opening the door for her and then locking it with magic once she’s gone.

“We need to head back to our room and make sure that we’ve got our weapons and things before we have to go to our trial,” Raiden says somewhat reluctantly.

I open my mouth to reply when the familiar magic builds in the air. I instinctively know that it’s the portal for my trial, and I call Asael and Betty to me, waving to the guys as I get pulled in.

Looking around me, I’m pleased to see that I’m in some kind of dense woodland, the trees don’t look like any that I have seen on the Earth Realm, but that doesn’t really mean much since I don’t really have that great knowledge of trees. Reaching behind me, I put Asael on my back, the harness for him immediately appearing, but although I know that a harness will appear for Betty if I do the same thing, I can’t quite allow myself to let go of her.

She’s my safety blanket, and always has been.

For now, she’s going to remain in my hands until I work out what exactly we’re dealing with here. I am aware that I need to protect Betty and not give away to anyone that she can make bullets that kill everything. At least I think that she can. We

don't really know until we've tested that, but that's something that needs to wait until after the Choosing, and when we're not being broadcast to realms of supernaturals.

I slowly take in my surroundings, aware that something is going to happen, because otherwise, what would be the point of the trial? As I do this, my mind drifts to Dimitri and Coen and the fact that they both saw my last trial. Logically, I know that I shouldn't do what I do next. Dimitri is not the person that he once was, and allowing myself to pretend otherwise is only going to cause me pain.

I know that.

However, I can't help myself, and as I slowly move forward, keeping my footsteps as light as possible, I flick my left hand, the one that isn't gripping Betty tightly. To anyone watching, it would just look like I'm fidgeting, or nervous and that's the way that my energy is showing itself, but to Coen and Dimitri, it's our sign, specifically a sign for each one, my way of thanking them both even though I can't thank them in person.

For Dimitri, that's because it wouldn't be safe, and I would end up in some sort of emotional turmoil because of it. For Coen, that's because I have no idea when I will see him next, and if I do see him, I can't exactly thank him for helping me because of the response and questions that would elicit from Kylan.

So for now, this is the best that I can do. This is the only thanks that I can give them both, and if they are watching, they will understand what it means.

The sound of a branch snapping to my left and further back instantly tells me that I am being hunted by something.

I smile, now this is the kind of shit that I can deal with. Being hunted through strange woods by something unknown is something that I am far more comfortable with than

anything emotional or from my past.

Bring it on.

My steps don't falter as I move forward in exactly the same way that I was. My instincts tingle, telling me that I'm not being stalked by only one thing. I don't know exactly how many more, but it certainly brings the excitement level up even higher.

My fingers flex on Betty as I glance up into the trees. I know that whatever is stalking me is doing so from the ground. I heard the underbrush moving, that doesn't mean that whatever is following me can't climb, but it does mean that I might get some kind of advantage if I go up into the trees.

Reaching behind me with the hand that is holding Betty, I hope that I'm right and that some sort of harness will appear to keep her strapped to me and next to Asael. When I don't feel anything, I panic momentarily that I'm going to have to put her down and risk losing her here, before I remember that I should be able to send her home.

"Thank you, Betty. You may go home," I whisper, barely any sound leaving my lips.

She disappears, and I allow myself a brief moment of relief before I start to swiftly climb up the nearest tree. It's only after I touch it and begin to climb that I realize that, since I have no idea what kind of trees these are, or where I am, they could be poisonous. Thankfully, nothing happens, and I don't immediately drop to the floor and start to scream in pain, so I consider that a win and just carry on climbing.

The canopy is so densely packed up here that I can easily move from one tree to another, without too much hardship on my part. The only real thing I need is balance, which I do have.

Just as I jump to get to the next tree, something jumps up from the ground and

smacks into me, knocking me off my trajectory and sending me hurtling toward the ground. I prepare myself to roll to minimize the impact of the landing, and when I pop back up, my eyes widen.

Shit, it's the backward knee walking things, that I came across is Luesidious, apart from there's not just one this time. From the quick count I manage to do, I think there is around six. I seem to have run into a pack, one that is surrounding me quickly.

From past experience, I know that I do not want to find myself in the middle of them. Going up against one of them was difficult enough, and in fact, the only way that I managed to win was because Asael suddenly appeared under the bush next to me. If he hadn't, I would have died. I pull Asael from his sheath on my back and silently request that he split into two so that I can better protect myself.

I need to get away from this grouping, which means I'm going to have to run. Before I have fully gotten my feet underneath me, I'm moving. The first head falls, which enrages the others even more, and the small gap that I had seen that I could escape through begins to close. I spin and I whirl my swordsstabbing and slicing as arms, and heads fall to the floor with a thump. Any bodies that fall, I make sure that the heads are kicked far away from them, still not willing to risk them being able to put themselves back together.

I know I haven't killed them all, but I have killed enough of them that a pathway has opened up again, and before the last one can get its hands on me, I run. If these creatures can put themselves back together, then there is absolutely no way that I want to stay where I am. In this situation, I can't risk it.

As I run, I glance over my shoulder, and I'm surprised to see that only one creature is still following me. I begin to slow, knowing that I can take on this last one, and hopefully clear this trial quickly.

Heat suddenly pulses from my chest, and it causes me to stumble at the shock of it. Glancing down, I realize that the heat must be emanating from my necklace, the gift from the imps. I'm so distracted by the absurdity of it that I realize too late that the backward knee creature has gotten far closer than I should have let it.

Lifting Asael, I know that I'm not going to move quickly enough, and that the creature is going to get a good swipe in.



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I brace myself for the pain that I know is going to happen any second now, but the pain doesn't come. Instead, some kind of invisible force hits the creature, knocking it off course and away from me. I watch in horrified fascination as the same invisible force seems to pull it apart, scattering the pieces all around us in a bloody splattering.

I should probably run, the invisible force could easily turn on me, but I find myself rooted to the spot as I watch. When it is thoroughly pulled apart and very definitely dead. I see the grass dip with the weight of giant feet as it pads its way over to me, but I still can't see it, and I still can't make myself move.

Weirdly enough, I'm not scared, or even worried. I'm just curious.

So curious, that I make Asael disappear into his single sword form, although I don't allow him to disappear completely, I'm not stupid.

For some insane reason, I start to lift my hand, almost as if I want to stroke it before I think better of the action, and begin to pull it back. Before I can, though, a soft, wet nose that feels kind of like a dog's nose, nudges my hand gently. My brain compares it to a dog's nose, but I have never seen, or rather felt, a dog's nose that is this big. It's bigger than my whole hand, and I try not to let the obvious size of it panic me.

It just saved my life by killing that last backward knee walking thing. I'm also reasonably certain that if it wanted to eat me, it would have done so by now. I slowly begin to move my fingers, and then my hand, so that I'm stroking the side of its huge head. It has soft fur, and I try really hard to make sure that I don't accidentally poke it in the eye or something. I don't imagine that it would be very receptive to pets if I did that. Whatever it is, it seems to like the pets though as he or she leans into my hand

asking for more, and making me smile.

A few moments of pets later, my necklace vibrates. The beast in front of me gets taller, and I realize that, impossibly, it was lying down or crouching or something, and it wasn't at its full height, which means that it is even bigger than I initially thought. My wonder at his size gets pushed back though as he lets out a warning growl. Instinctively, I know that it's not directed at me, but that it's warning of a threat nearby.

The air around the creature shimmers for a merely a moment and I get a glimpse of the same kind of creature that bit me in Luesidious, I don't have time to question it, or double check, as not only does it disappear again, becoming invisible, because two more of the backward knee walking big mouthed creatures come charging at us. He clearly picked up their approach long before I did. Immediately, I turn to the one that's closest to me, somehow instinctively knowing that the creature will take care of the other one. While I swing and dodge the arms of the attacking creature, I see the beast easily and quickly tear the other one apart. The creature that's attacking me is determined, and my attention needs to focus on the thing trying to eat me, rather than the one that is trying to help me.

The thing swings for me, with a weird clicking squeal, that grates on my ears and makes me want to cover them with my hands, which I'm assuming is what it's aiming for. It's a really good distraction technique, and one that almost gets me. I swing for it with Asael, pleased to find that it apparently can't make the noise when it's fighting for its life. There's something different about this one, it's stronger than the ones that I fought under the trees, and it seems more vicious. Which I know probably doesn't make sense since they're all trying to eat me, and that inherently makes them vicious. We fight back and forth for a while; each time it makes a swipe at me, it gets closer to actually harming me, and I'm beginning to tire now as well.

I need to end this as quickly as possible.

Finally, I see the perfect opportunity for me to behead the fucker. It's a risk, it means I have to get far closer to the creature than I would like, but I have no idea when this opportunity is going to present itself again, and I can't risk not taking it and having to fight for longer. Especially since I'm losing momentum and getting tired now. With my decision made, I wait until it tries to attack me again and then dive toward it, rolling on the floor and popping back up well within its reach. As my sword arcs upward, the backward knee walking thing grabs one of my arms. I yank it free as the pain registers, but put it to the back of my mind so that I can continue on my original task.

The head drops to the floor with a thump, and I kick it away from the body, as I look down at my arm where the creature grabbed me. My eyebrows rise slightly when I see that where it gripped me, its hand has burned through several layers of my clothes, all the way down to the skin, and has left behind an angry burn in the shape of its hand.

Ouch. That's going to need healing by Doc, and the sooner the better, hopefully. For now, though, I need to focus on other things. Like the invisible creature and see if he needs help.

I turn back to the creature to see if it's okay, and maybe see if I can figure out how the creature from Luesidious is here, because I'm pretty sure that it's the same one. Although, I don't know how I'm sure. Turning around, I suddenly feel the now familiar feeling of the portal pulling at me, and sure enough, I soon find myself back in my room.

I sigh.

I guess that's another mystery that we'll have to add to the ever-growing pile. Not once did I feel threatened by the creature, but even when it bit me in Luesidious, I had no desire to harm it, which is odd when you consider that I should have wanted to

defend myself.

## Chapter Seven

Neith

Looking around the room, I'm disappointed to see that the guys aren't in here, which probably means that they are still on their task. In theory, I should be able to watch it, but I have no idea how. I guess I could find Mabel and ask her, but the first thing that I want to do is shower and put on some clean clothes. We didn't get the chance to do anything like that this morning, since we had a slow morning, enjoyed breakfast, and then Mabel came to tell us that we were doing tasks. We pretty much got pulled straight in after that.

Well, I did. I don't know about the guys.

Grabbing another outfit that is pretty much the exact replica of the one that I'm currently wearing, minus the burn holes and dirt, I head into the bathroom and get into the hot and steamy water. As I let the water wash away all the dirt and grime, I realize that the trial that I have just done hasn't taken very long at all, which means that I should be able to enjoy the shower without fear of being pulled into a task. It also means that I may be able to explore the castle a bit more. Maybe I'll be able to find more paintings of my parents. Or perhaps even books? That would be really interesting and give me proper insight into who they were.

It also means that as long as I can find Mabel, I should also be able to watch the guys. Although if their tasks are anything like mine, I'm not sure how well I'm going to cope with watching it. I think I would rather watch it than not watch it.

I think.

The voices seem to start murmuring in an amused way at my circling thoughts, and I roll my eyes. I'm going to focus on one thing at a time. The first is the shower, which I am absolutely determined to enjoy because it is very likely that I'm not going to get to enjoy a shower like this until we get home. Then I will go and find Mabel and ask her how I can watch the guys. I am assuming that I can watch them since they can watch me. It would be a bit one-sided if they could see me whenever I did a personal task, but I couldn't see them.

I tilt my head as I think about it, temporarily forgetting that I'm in the shower, and ending up spluttering and wiping the water out of my eyes as I nearly drown myself.

That may have been an exaggeration.

By the time I get out of the shower, I am well and truly ready to see the guys' task, or even see if they're back yet. The more I think about it, the more worried I am about them. Because of this, I get dressed quickly, being careful of the burn on my arm, which, although painful, is manageable, and then head to the door of my room to find Mabel.

Coen

I wonder if I could leave them all here, and allow their own stupidity to kill them? If one of them dies, does that mean that we all fail?

Musing on that thought for a moment, I decide that it isn't something that I want to risk, despite wanting to see them dead. I can't risk that one of them dying would mean that I fail as well, and that I wouldn't be able to see Neith and the guys again.

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:47 am*

“Where the fuck are we?” Jamie asks, as he looks around the deep gully that we’ve been portaled to.

The cliff sides rise steeply on either side of us, going straight up and reaching toward the red sky.

Red sky?

The telltale hue of the sky is the giveaway for me, and I immediately know what realm we’re in and that we need to move. The creatures that reside here are wild, untamed, and like to eat any supernatural that is stupid enough to set foot in their territory. They don’t simply kill either, that would be a blessing compared to the slow and torturous ways that they prefer to kill.

“We need to move,” I growl, as I start walking.

Predictably, all of them, apart from Kylen, begin to follow me. I have saved their lives enough by this point that they have no reason not to trust me. Of course, Kylen has a problem with that.

“You are not in charge. I am the leader, and you do what I say,” he practically growls.

I sigh, but stop moving and turn back around to face him. There is no point in arguing with him, and actually, if I do, then he’s going to take it out on me later on. I’d like to avoid that as much as I possibly can. Plus, I would really like to check on Neith, and I can’t do that if I’m trying to heal from the wounds that Kylen has inflicted on me.

I wish I could have stayed with her last night, but Kylen was demanding that I return using the control that he has over me. The power that fucking necklace gives him. I knew that she would be alright with the guys though, and that's the only reason why I didn't completely freak out.

I'm just so incredibly grateful that I was there for her when she needed me and that I was able to help her. That Dimitri and I were able to help her. She is going to have so many questions about that, I know she is. Hell, I have questions. She was more than aware that Dimitri was there, more so than she usually is when she's in the midst of a panic attack. I also know that what happened had a profound effect on Dimitri, he lost it.

After what he's put her through over the years, the fact that she can still take comfort in him, even if it's through me, says a lot about her character and our connection. It says a lot about our bond and how strong it used to be before everything went to shit, in more ways than one.

"That's better," Kylen replies like the asshole he is.

"What should we do then?" Fetrick asks. "Do you know where we are?"

Kylen tenses. He clearly has no idea, or he wouldn't be standing around doing nothing, he'd be fucking moving. Fortunately for me, I love fighting and I'm really fucking good at it, so if he wants to stand here and wait for the big ass scorpion-like creatures, that are the size of fucking cars, with two poisonous tails and four pincers to get here, then by all means we'll wait.

Maybe I'll get lucky and one of them will get jabbed by the things. I frown as I cross my arms over my chest. Oh yeah, I already decided that would be a bad idea.

My mood darkens. I may be able to fight, but fighting of a pack of the oversized

scorpions while trying to protect a bunch of fuckers that really should be better fighters than they are, is not easy and I no longer want to hang around and listen the absolute shit that is about to come out of Kylen's mouth. Unfortunately for me I don't have a fucking choice.

"What do you think we have to do in order to pass the trial?" Rupert asks, his eyes flashing to those of his dragon and showing his unease.

"I imagine that it's got something to do with getting out of here," Jamie replies thoughtfully.

My eyes move to our surroundings, and I become tense as I realize that my fears have come true, and we've been found. Now we really need to fucking move.

"There's something coming, we need to move," I try again. Hoping that it will be one of the rare occasions that he will listen to me instead of arguing or thinking that he knows better.

"We need to figure out what the goal is first. There isn't anything coming, you're just being dramatic," Kylen replies flippantly.

Kylen may not be willing to listen to me, but I've been right enough times in the past that the others are immediately on edge and looking around trying to spot what I can sense.

Kylen opens his mouth, presumably to say something ridiculous to his other team members, but before he can the ground starts to rumble with the skittering of scoriouises, as a herd of the scorpion like creatures turn the corner, heading straight toward us.

"What the fuck are they?" Kylen yells in panic.



Without waiting for an answer, he starts running, quickly abandoning the rest of his team, he even goes so far as to push Rupert over in a very deliberate move to ensure the creatures get distracted by him, and give himself a chance to escape.

There is absolutely no mistaking that he is an asshole.

A fucking stupid one at that because this isn't a normal mission where no one but us can see how he's behaving, most of the supernatural world is watching, and he either keeps forgetting that fact or, he is that blinded by his own fucking ego that he doesn't realize how fucking wrong he is.

If I had to bet on it, I would say that it's the second one.

Everyone races after him, none of us are surprised by the way that he treats all of us now, although I am sure that they're all grateful that he takes the bulk of his frustrations out on me and not them. They even enjoy joining in occasionally, especially Rupert, so there is absolutely no love lost between us. As we run, barely staying ahead of the creatures behind us, it becomes apparent that there is no way out of here but up the steep cliff walls.

"There!" Rupert yells, pointing to what looks like a large cave opening near the top of the cliffside up ahead and on the left-hand side.

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There are no other caves that I can see, and I know from past experience that the Scoriouses won't follow us up there. They are known to climb, but not that high.

"Go now! It's the only way out," I yell.

I stop running. There is no way at all that they are going to get up the cliffside and to the safety of the cave if I don't stay down here and fight the fuckers off, fortunately for me, Scoriouses run in relatively small packs. There are only five currently barreling in toward me, unfortunately for me, they run in small packs because they are deadly as fuck and don't need there to be any more of them to hunt effectively.

Luckily, I am always up for a challenge, and the anger at the situation I find myself in, and have found myself in for years, added to the fact that all I want to do is be with Neith and the guys even more so now that they are together as a team, and are so fucking close, all of the anger that has built over that makes me a deadly opponent, and I will be the first one to admit, that it makes me a broken one too.

That's probably made obvious to anyone watching when instead of looking scared, I spin my two curved swords in my hands and grin, bouncing on my toes as my whole being fills with excitement. Instead of waiting for the creatures to come to me, I race toward them, meeting them head on, my blades spinning and twirling as I do, and slicing through the creatures with an ease that shows my experience and most likely gives away just how long I have been fighting for my life. As I take down one with the sword in my left hand, I press a button on the sword in my right hand that activates the mechanism within it and as another pinchy fucker jumps at me, I flick my hand, and the blade leaves the hilt on a chain. It wraps around the body of the Scoriouses tightly, and I yank down on it hard, causing the creature to fall to the floor

with a hard thump.

Keeping a tight hold on the chain, I quickly dispatch another one before I launch myself at the one that I've caught and carefully avoiding the pincers at the front and the deadly tails at the back, I jump onto its back and plunge my sword straight through the top of its head, killing it instantly. There is no time to celebrate my victory though because I still have two more to kill and now that I have killed three of their herd members, they are even more determined to kill me and rightly so.

I would feel the same way.

It doesn't take me too long to get rid of them, but I don't want to risk their deaths attracting anymore of them so I turn on my heel, and race for the edge of the cliff where I can see that the others still haven't managed to reach the cave entrance. I roll my eyes, if I hadn't been down here to fight off these fuckers then they most likely would have been caught. Now that I have decided that I can't pass the trials unless we all pass the trials, I have an even bigger desire to keep them alive, for more than just a command made by Kylen.

I refuse to fail because of their fucking incompetence.

Placing my swords back in their rightful places on my back, I begin to scale the side of the deep trench. This would be so much easier if I had my wings, but I haven't felt the wind beneath them for years now, not since Kylen got his talons into me. I know why I'm not using my magic, I can't, but what I don't understand is why the others aren't. All of them are capable of either climbing or flying up here and yet they're climbing up at a snail's pace instead.

In fact, they are moving so slowly that I am already catching up with them. I know better than to pass any of them though, Kylen will take it as a sign of disrespect and then punish me for it later. It's when I catch up to them that I realize that it's Kylen

himself that's slowing them all down, as none of them are stupid enough to pass him. I still don't know why he isn't flying, but I don't really care enough to ask him, or any of them.

The problem is, that the slower we climb the more taxing it is on our bodies as we have to hang around and wait for Kylen to progress further before the rest of us can. This is not an easy cliff face to climb, not that they tend to be, and if he doesn't hurry his ass up one of us is going to fall.

Maybe that's what he wants. With Kylen I never know his true motives.

The cave is still a few meters above us and I can tell that the others are tiring, just as the thought crosses my mind, Fetrick slips. His hands scramble on the wall trying to find his grip again, but everywhere that he grabs seems to crumble to pieces as soon as he touches it. I frown, that doesn't seem right, inhaling sharply I scent the familiar scent of Kylen's magic and my gaze snaps to him. He has no idea that I can smell and identify when someone uses magic, it's not a trait that is common for dragons, or many supernaturals actually.

As soon as my gaze lands on him, I know that my suspicions are correct and that he's the one that is causing Fetrick to slip and the wall to crumble. I would love to say that I'm surprised, but I'm really not. He's mumbling under his breath, his eyes glued to Fetrick and a smirk playing around his lips as he really enjoys watching Fetrick panic.

Fetrick isn't a small supernatural, and as a panther shifter he should have absolutely no problem scaling this wall. Cats may always land on their feet and the same can be said for cat shifters, but not from this high up. I glance below me, and my eyebrows rise, even if he did survive the fall, he wouldn't survive the new herd of Scoriouses that have gathered where the ones I killed were.

That's the trouble with Scorioues as a species, if one of their own dies, any others that are in the area seem to know and they all swarm to the area. There will be more coming and there will be too many to fight off. We definitely can't go back down.

A cry of panic from Fetrick has my attention looking back up the wall just in time to see him lose his fight of trying to hang on, he falls past the other team members and none of them even attempt to stop his fall. Heartless bastards. I can't let him die, or rather I can't let Kylen kill him. He's the only one that hasn't joined in with the others unless he has been ordered to and although I have no feelings of loyalty or friendship or anything really toward him, I can't let him die the horrible death that awaits him if he falls from this height.

I position my feet on the wall and then use the cliff face like a springboard as I launch myself backward in an arc. I time it just right so that I catch Fetrick by his wrist. As we hit the wall, I partially shift the hand that's not holding onto him and grunt as my talons dig deep into the cliff face leaving a streak of deep claw marks as we slide a couple of feet before we finally stop. Waiting until he has a good grip on the wall before I let go, I'm surprised when he gives me a small nod of thanks.

It's the most acknowledgement I have ever received for saving one of their lives.

"What the fuck are you playing at Kylen?" Rupert surprises me by asking, he's not usually one to question his leader. "You do realize that if one of us dies then we all fail, and we have no idea what that means, other than the teams are never seen again, which most likely means that they're dead. Are you trying to doom us all?"

"Do not question me!" Kylen yells. Before he starts climbing again, though, his piercing gaze finds me and promises retribution.

Yeah, yeah. I knew when I saved Fetrick that Kylen would most likely make me pay for it, I can't find it in myself to care.

“I don’t, you know I don’t, but it’s like you want us to die,” Rupert replies, his voice tight.

“We need to get up to the cavern and hopefully pass this level,” Jamie interrupts their bickering and he’s right.

We can’t hang around on the edge of a fucking cliff face for much longer, we have no idea if this trial is timed, but either way we are still wasting it by doing this. Kylen doesn’t answer, but he does carry on climbing at a faster speed this time. He is definitely up to something that affects the whole team. The thing is I can’t see how it would benefit him to kill off members of his team. I have already come to the conclusion that he never wanted Neith on his team, and it really was just about one upping the guys. He is obsessed in the worst way.

## Chapter Eight

Coen

It's not something that needs to be thought about now, we have more pressing concerns to focus on.

Because I’m the last one over the ledge that leads into the cave, I get a kind of pre-warning that there’s something up there that is trying to kill us. Purely from the sounds of surprise that the guys make and then the following sounds of fighting that reach me moments after Kylen has gone over the edge. I speed up and propel myself over the ledge and into the cave, reaching for my swords before I’ve even landed.

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One of the warriors rushes me, and I fall backward on purpose, positioning my feet to send him flying out of the cave entrance. As I quickly find myself surrounded, and begin to fight, I realize that they are a race of supes similar in appearance to humans, but all of them are over seven feet tall, with sharp black claws and rows of pointed teeth. They dress in furs and animal skins of the creatures that they hunt in this realm, and live in the caves, or high up in the trees. They are extremely good fighters.

As I launch yet another one of them out of the cave entrance, I spot Jamie fighting against one of them who has a scroll in his hand, not holding a sword. I would bet my ass that is what we need to get to pass this trial and get out of here. I am so ready for this to be done and to be away from these people that I double my attack on those surrounding us and fight my way toward Jamie, and more importantly, the scroll.

My sword pierces the heart of a warrior charging me, and I barely pause as I continue my forward trajectory and pull my sword from his chest before he's even hit the floor. Picking up my speed, I run up the back of someone who is fighting Kylen, and dive over the top of Jamie and the warrior with the scroll. The warrior is so focused on his fight with Jamie that he doesn't see me coming, and I, by some miracle, manage to grasp hold of the scroll as the warriors' eyes collide with mine, widening slightly before I lose sight of them as I tuck into a roll.

By the time that I pop back up and turn around, they've all disappeared, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Give me the scroll," Kylen demands.

I reluctantly hand it over to him, knowing that there's no point in arguing with him.

“What does it say?” Rupert asks, as we all watch Kylen open it.

Kylen takes his time to read it, prolonging the time that we’re all waiting and watching him, and that he is the center of attention.

I roll my eyes.

“Kylen, we probably shouldn’t hang around here for much longer than we have to. We have no idea if their disappearance is temporary or not,” Fetrick points out.

Kylen rolls his eyes, but decides to reply. Most likely because we’re all glaring at him by this point, and he’s pissed everyone off today.

“It’s the spell to call the portal to send us home,” Kylen explains, and then, without prompting, chants the spell.

I feel the familiar tug of a portal and breathe a sigh of relief, thank fuck that’s over.

Neith

As soon as I got out of the shower, I went to find the guys and was surprised when I remembered the way to their room, after knocking and getting no reply, I asked Castle if they were in there which he confirmed that they weren’t, meaning that they were definitely still doing their trial, which made sense since my task didn’t last very long at all. I quickly changed my objective to looking for Mabel or someone else that I could ask to help me watch the guys do their trial, but I couldn’t find anyone and decided to head back to my room instead.

When I get back to the room, I find a tray of food waiting for me and a little handwritten note telling me that I did really well and that, just as I suspected, the guys are still doing their trial. I have no idea how she knew that I would be back when I



was, or how she knew that I would be back before them, but I'm assuming that it has something to do with the fact that they have always held the Choosing here, and that means that they get some perks.

Knowledge of the inner workings being one of them.

Although it can't be too accurate because I have been back for a while now, and the food definitely wasn't in here earlier, after I got out of the shower, I would have noticed it. I always notice food.

Her note makes me smile, but I do wish that the woman herself were here. I can't have missed her by much, but I didn't see her in the hallway. There really isn't much else that I can do right now, and I don't really want to carry on roaming the castle hallways without knowing whether Kylen and his team are here, or if they are on a trial too.

It's simply not safe.

Picking up the tray, I'm not ashamed to say that I make quick work of the food, clearly I'm a lot hungrier than I thought I was, even though breakfast wasn't that long ago. Any sort of physical activity always makes me hungry though, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Once I'm done, I know I need to find something to do to try to take my mind off the danger that the guys are no doubt in doing their Choosing trial, and the pain in my arm. It hurts like a mother fucker.

"Oh shit," I say out loud rolling my eyes at my own stupidity as I head toward my still packed bag of stuff. I'm glad that the guys didn't manage to move it to their room before they were pulled into their own task. I had temporarily forgotten that they were going to do that and that the plan is to stay in their room from now on.

Thank fuck.

I hate sleeping on my own, and the nightmares are likely to stick around for the next couple of days at least. They will be much easier to cope with if I am not sleeping alone.

Kneeling down, I unzip my bag and pull out the stiletto, setting it down on the floor next to the bag so that it's out of the way while I gather all of the ingredients and things that I need in order to make a healing poultice for the burn on my arm. It won't do much, it certainly won't heal it like Doc can, but it will provide me with some relief until Doc can heal it for me.

Moving over to the tiny kitchen that is thankfully in my room, I rummage through the cupboards until I can find a small pot, a chopping board, and a knife. Once I have all the things that I need, I set to work, humming the same tune that I always do and pausing every now and then to talk to Betty and Asael. The whole process is so familiar that I relax more than I have been able to for the entire time that I have been here. My mind stays entirely on the task and doesn't wander anywhere, which is a welcome reprieve from the current worries that seem to come from all directions at the moment.

This recipe is a relatively quick one, and as I speak the healing words over the top of it, just like Sully always taught me to do, I feel that place of magic that I am just starting to recognize inside me respond to the words and lend a small stream of magic to the healing potion. It surprises me, and I wonder whether it has always done that, and I just wasn't aware enough to notice it before, or whether it's a new development. Either way though, I am grateful and it's not until I have placed the mixture over the burn and wrapped it with the gauze, that I realize just how painful it was and the relief that I feel is immense, making me let out the tense breath that I hadn't realized that I had been holding.

Once I have tidied everything away, I look around the room with a sigh. I really want to watch the guys do their task, but I have no idea how to do that. With nothing else

to do, and knowing that I can't just wander around the castle and explore like I would like to do, just in case the Draconian team are around and decide to take advantage of the fact that the guys aren't here, and decide to try something. I think they would find it a lot more difficult than they think that they would, but I don't want to give them the opportunity. I also really don't want to provide Kylen with the chance to order Coen to hurt me. Coen would never forgive himself, and I really don't want to put him in that position.

With all of that in mind, I decide to distract myself by heading back up to the fourth floor to study the painting of my parents again. It feels so weird to say my parents, especially because of who they are. Yet, it doesn't feel wrong. I guess it in part helps that I know Pete, and that in his own kind of hands-off way, he has always looked after me. I have so many questions that I want to ask him, and you would think that I would be feeling anger toward him, and as I leave my room and head to the stairs that will take me up to the painting, I try to find that anger that I'm supposed to be feeling, or at least that I think I'm supposed to be feeling, but I can't find it.

The thing is, I have been through so much in my life, I have made decisions that I'm not proud of, I've been forced into choices that I wouldn't usually make, and because of that I understand that, although I don't like that he was right there and didn't tell me what he was to me, he was still there in the way that he could be. I have no idea what the circumstances were, none of us do, and until I have spoken to Pete and have gained some understanding of what happened, I will reserve judgment.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:47 am*

I have to admit that I am weirdly nervous as I reach the hallway and turn toward the painting. There is a part of me that feels like it may have disappeared, which wouldn't be a massive deal since the guys saw it too, and so I wouldn't be questioning whether it actually exists, but it would be disappointing since I want to see it again.

It's only when I'm standing in front of the portrait and smiling up at it that I remember that I took a photo of it on my phone, and so I could look at it on there if it had disappeared.

My mind stills as I study them, they look happy, really happy. They seemed to be happy in the way that they interacted with each other when we saw them in the vision. I like that. I was also a big fan of the way that they dealt with their people, those that they were directly involved with, and those out on the front lines. The queen, especially, couldn't wait to get back out to fight alongside her people, and she certainly wasn't dressed like any queen that I have seen depicted before. She was dressed in a similar way to the way that I do when I go on a job. Except that she was dressed in leather and had swords.

So fucking cool.

"We really have to stop meeting this way," Ribit's voice makes me jump, and she laughs.

I give her the side eye treatment, trying to hide my amusement as I say, "You know I'm starting to think that you do that on purpose and for your own amusement."

She shrugs, “I’m not going to admit to that,” her smile widens, “but I won’t deny it either.”

I grin, “Smart woman.”

She courtesy’s, “Why thank you.”

I chuckle and then say, “I wanted to apologize for how weird I acted last time we spoke. I would love to tell you that I’m not normally that weird, but that would be a lie.”

She smiles, “Don’t worry about it. I prefer weird people. They tend to freak out less when they realize that I’m dead. Although not many people have been able to talk to me like you do.”

The way that she is watching me tells me that she has phrased her sentence that bluntly on purpose, to see my reaction.

“Mabel did mention that you were a ghost. I have to say that I was surprised, especially since I was able to shake your hand,” I reply honestly.

Her eyebrows rise, “Trust me, no one was as surprised as I was about that.”

I pull a face, “So that hasn’t happened before?”

She shakes her head, “Nope, that was a first for me.” Watching me curiously, she adds, “Want to see if it was a one-off?”

I nod, smiling as I can easily see how excited she is to try again, “Sure, I don’t see why not.”

She holds her hand out to me, unable to hide her anxiety, and I find myself really hoping that I can shake her hand again, for her sake. Even if it means that there is something really weird about me. If I'm being honest, I came to terms with my utter weirdness decades ago.

As my hand closes around hers, and her expression lights up with genuine happiness, I can't help but smile along with her.

"Well I'll be damned," she mutters after a moment, when she finally drops my hand.

"I told you I was weird," I grin.

"And I told you that you were the best kind of weird, there's the proof."

"Thanks. I wonder why I can touch you though, you're a spirit, and as you said, I shouldn't be able to," I ponder.

She frowns, "I wish that I could answer you, but it has never happened before, and I've been hanging around this castle for centuries."

My eyes widen, "Wow, that long? I bet you've seen some interesting things."

Her confused expression turns into a mischievous smile, "Oh, I absolutely have. I could tell you stories that would shock the shit out of you. Especially since most people can't see me, so they don't know that I'm around."

"I definitely want to hear some of those," I reply, with a grin.

She frowns slightly, "I'm not actually sure what I am allowed to tell you."

I nod, "That's okay. I don't want you to get in trouble or anything."

“I’m surprised you aren’t watching your gorgeous men,” she adds, changing the subject. I give her an amused raised eyebrow look, and she grins, “What? I may be dead, but I’m not blind. They’re the nicest eye candy we’ve had around here for a long time.”

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I burst out laughing at her honesty. I have to admit that I love it. Very few people genuinely speak their minds these days, and it's refreshing that she does, although I suppose that she isn't from these days, so that's probably why.

"They are extremely yummy," I reply, matching her honesty. "I would love to be watching them in their trial, but no one told me how to do it, and I've searched all over the castle for Mabel or someone else who can tell me how to do it, and I couldn't find anyone else who may be able to help. So I gave up and came up here instead."

"Oh, they will all be preparing the evening meal, or have gone into town or to visit their families since the castle is empty because all of the teams are on trials," Ribit explains.

"Oh, that makes sense," I reply.

"I can help you watch it though," Ribit says with a grin.

"Really, that would be awesome. I'm trying my best to distract myself and not worry, but I'm not going to be able to keep it up for much longer," I admit. It's surprisingly easy to talk to her.

I would be concerned about that, but the voices aren't warning me. In fact, I think they like her, and if the voices like her, that's good enough for me.

Her expression is understanding as she replies, "I get that. Come on, you probably want to watch it somewhere comfortable, we can go in here."



She turns on her heel and walks straight through the door behind us. It momentarily shocks me since to me she looks completely normal, and if Mabel hadn't said anything, then I would have had absolutely no idea that she was a spirit. I wonder if she would look completely normal to the guys as well, or if they can even see her?

Shit, did I even tell them about Ribit? I pause, trying to think back, but I have absolutely no idea if I did or not. I make a mental note to tell them about her. Especially since I am really intrigued to see if they can see her like I do, Mabel said that she couldn't, but the guys are stronger than they should be, and Raiden especially should be able to see and interact with her.

I jump as Ribit's head pops through the door in front of me, and she bursts out laughing at my reaction.

"Dude, that is such a ghost thing to do. You couldn't possibly be any more stereotypical," I point out as I grip the door handle and push open the door.

Ribit's laughter is still in her voice as she replies, "It was funny, though."

Letting free a small chuckle, I reply, "Yeah, alright, I admit it was."

As I follow her further into the room, I look around. It's beautiful, just like all of the other rooms, and it seems to be like the sitting area of my bedroom. Complete with a roaring fire, and comfy looking couch. We both take seats on the couch, and I look at her curiously.

"How is it that you go through the door, but you can sit on the couch?" I ask curiously, unable to help myself.

She smiles, "Centuries of practice. Not all spirits can do it, and it takes a long time to get the hang of it."

## Chapter Nine

Neith

“Oh,” I reply. “That’s really interesting. If I ask too many questions, just tell me to shut up, and I absolutely won’t be upset if you refuse to answer a question. Goddess knows that I have questions that I would refuse to answer.”

She smiles, “Thank you. I really appreciate your understanding.”

She changes the subject again, clearly done with that conversation and most likely where it could lead. I’m not stupid enough to ask her why she is still here when she could have and still could move on, and I’m also not going to offer the services of Raiden to help her move on. I’m hoping that if she wants to, she will tell me, and then if she wants to move on, I will help her figure out a way to do so if the problem is that she’s stuck here or something. The thing is, I haven’t known her for very long, and I know very little about her. The last thing I want to do is to upset her.

Continuing, she adds, “I think that they probably assumed that you already knew the spell, but since you are human, or at least that’s what everyone assumes, you wouldn’t have been taught it or be able to do it.”

I raise my eyebrow and repeat her sentence, “That’s what everyone assumes?”

She gives me a look, “Oh, please. You are most certainly not human. Far from it, but it’s not up to me to give you any more information than that.”

“Of course,” I reply. I know what I am now though, I’m a motherfucking angel just like my mom, so her vague answer and refusal to say anything else doesn’t annoy me as much as it would have only days ago.

“Don’t pout,” she teases, making me laugh.

“I’m not pouting. I’ve sort of gotten used to being told that someone knows something, but can’t or won’t tell me by this point,” I tell her.

She frowns, “I’m sorry. That has to be really fucking frustrating.”

I nod, “Oh yeah, it definitely is. I get it though, all of them want to tell me, there are just extenuating circumstances.”

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“You know, I don’t think that many people would look at it that way,” Ribit says thoughtfully. “At least not someone as young as you are.”

“You’re the same age as me or thereabouts,” I retort with a laugh.

“I am nearly six hundred years old. I may look like I’m the same age as you, but even when I died, I was a couple of centuries older than you are now,” she replies.

I face palm, making her laugh as I reply, “Well shit, that should have been obvious. I know that supes age differently to humans, and therefore don’t look their ages. You also already told me that you had centuries of practice at sitting on things, so I should have known that you are a lot older than you look.”

She smiles, looking very amused, “Don’t worry about it, I definitely take it as a compliment that you forgot that I was dead.”

“It’s kind of hard not to,” I reply. “To me you are exactly the same as I am, even though you can stick your head through doors and scare the shit out of me.”

She bursts out laughing, “To be honest, it is such a relief to be able to talk to someone like this. It’s not often that someone can hear me, and no one can see me properly. Mabel is the only one that I can really communicate with regularly, and even then, that’s a bit hit and miss.”

“Well, I’m happy to talk to you whenever you would like,” I tell her honestly.

“Thank you,” she replies. “Okay, let’s see what your men are up to.” She says a spell,

and then what looks like a massive screen appears in front of us.

As soon as I realize what is happening on the screen, I panic, “Is that lava? Are they surrounded by fucking lava?”

“Oh fuck,” Ribit exclaims and that’s enough to confirm that what I’m seeing is correct.

Fucking hell.

Reed

“This is not good,” Griff mutters.

“Way to state the obvious, man,” Doc replies sarcastically, making my lips twitch in amusement despite the situation.

The situation is that we are on a shrinking piece of rock, in the middle of a ginormous sea of molten lava. It’s not normal lava either, which would be bad enough, but rather magical lava, which is even more deadly and unpredictable. As if that’s not bad enough, the journey to get here was noteasy, and we’re all injured in some way, although thankfully, none of us is worryingly injured. As always, when we’re in situations that are similar to this, unless it’s a life-threatening injury, we don’t get Doc to heal us, and we won’t until we’re safe. If we did, we would risk depleting his magic and putting him at a disadvantage, and none of us is willing to risk that.

The banks of the giant lake are far too far away for any of us to be able to jump it, so that option is immediately out, and we need to figure out another way to get to the safety of the banks and to complete this trial so that we can get back and check on Neith.

“Are we just assuming that we need to get to that bright spot on the bank in the distance?” I ask, just to make sure that we’re all on the same page.

Evander nods, his expression grim, “It looks like it. I can’t see any other obvious thing that it could be.”

“Unless it’s a trick?” River points out, bouncing on his toes and looking more excited than worried about the situation that we’re in.

At least there’s nothing new where he’s concerned. He’s still the same old River, no matter what kind of situation that we find ourselves in.

“Let’s just focus on figuring out a way to get over there and out of the huge lake of lava first, before we worry about whether it’s a trick or not,” Ransom suggests.

“Good plan,” River agrees with a smile.

“We could fly?” Raiden suggests and then adds. “It would take a couple of trips since only Reed and Griff can fly, but it might be our best bet to get over there.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea actually,” Van starts and as he opens his mouth, no doubt to suggest that the others are taken over first, the small piece of rock that we’re gathered on starts to rumble and shake hard enough that I struggle to stay standing up.

“What the fuck is happening now?” Doc asks, sounding more pissed than worried.

None of us have the answer since we have no idea what is happening either, but fortunately it doesn’t matter because the cause of the earthquake makes itself known as a giant snakelike creature, its head is the size of two double decker buses side by side, shoots out of the lava before diving back below the surface.

“Shit,” River curses.

“Lava snakes,” Raiden confirms grimly.

“That’s a kind of on-the-nose name for them,” I point out.

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Raiden smirks, “Well, their actual name is really complicated, really long, and pretty much just translates to lava snakes, so it’s much easier just to say that.”

“It’s going to make it a lot more difficult to fly out of here, at least there’s only one,” Griff says thoughtfully as he watches the snake rise out of the lava, shooting ridiculously high in the air. It’s getting so high up, and moving so quickly that if someone were flying they would have to move fucking quickly to get out of the way of it.

“Don’t they move in packs?” Ransom asks, looking at Raiden.

Raiden grimaces and nods, “Yeah, they do. We should probably try to fly out of here before the others show up. It will be impossible to do otherwise.”

“Erm, I’m sorry guys, but I’m not sure that I’m going to be much good,” Griff says. “My wing was damaged in the fight before we got here, and I’m not going to be able to fly quickly enough to get out of the way of that.”

“I can heal it,” Doc suggests.

“We’ve run out of time,” I say urgently as I point to where the lava is showing that there are several big things swimming just underneath the surface.

The rocky pad that we’re standing on rumbles again, and this time the force is so much that it starts to crack beneath our feet.

“The ground is splitting apart,” Van exclaims urgently, spotting what I have. “It’s not



pulling apart yet, but we don't have long."

"That's not the only problem," River points out as he moves away from the edge of the rock. "The lava is getting higher, we're going to run out of rock in a minute."

We're all tired, we're all hurt, and we seem to be in an impossible situation. We've lost one of our fliers, and even if we could fly, we wouldn't be able to all go at the same time. Which means whoever gets left behind is pretty much being sacrificed because there is a minuscule chance that we would be able to get back to them and save them.

Raiden's expression becomes contemplative, and as he opens his mouth, I interrupt, "Don't even think about it."

The others glance at Raiden and immediately catch on to what he's thinking.

"Absolutely not, it's not worth it," Van replies firmly.

We're all being really careful about what we say and how we phrase things because we don't want to give too much away, and we especially don't want to let on about Raiden's wings.

Raiden's frown is dark, but he nods, "Fine, but Doc needs to heal Griff."

Doc nods and heads toward Griff, putting his hands on him and making a show of it, taking a while to call his magic and using words to trigger the healing. In all, it takes around five minutes to heal, which is still incredibly quick, but is about four and a half minutes longer than it actually takes him to heal someone.

The whole time that he's healing, I'm keeping an eye on the creatures that are swarming in the lava around us, making it look like the lava is boiling and bubbling

violently.

“Why aren’t they attacking?” I ask.

“I have absolutely no idea,” Raiden replies. “I didn’t think that was something that I needed to do a lot of research on since they only exist in the Inferniolea realm, and we would know before we went there.”

“I don’t think we should be worrying about that right now,” Doc points out. “They aren’t attacking, and that’s good. We don’t need to figure out why they aren’t attacking. It gives us a few extra moments to figure out how to escape.”

“If we don’t come up with an alternative, then I’m going to go with my plan, Neith would kill us herself if we died because we didn’t,” Raiden comments.

“Fine,” Van replies, clearly not liking it.

He is right though, it would be stupid to die to keep our secrets.

“Any ideas?” River asks, his eyes on the creatures around us.

We’re all silent. I’m stumped. I have no idea how the hell we’re going to get out of this situation without using all of us who can fly to do it.

River

Judging from the looks on the others’ faces, they are as stuck as I am for ideas. We need to get out of here, and quickly. We were given a time limit at the very beginning of the task, but instead of the timer sticking around so that we knew how much time we had left, it just disappeared. Which is fucking unhelpful, because we’re just guessing how long we have left.

“River!” Evander shouts.

It brings me out of my thoughts, and my eyes widen in shock as I see a snake-like creature come barreling toward me. It looks like our time to figure something out has quickly come to an end. My sword is still in my hand, and I jump high, hoping that I’m going to be able to flip over the top of it. Unfortunately, it’s a lot fucking bigger than I gave it credit for, and I end up landing on its red-hot scales.

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“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I curse, as the heat starts to warm the soles of my feet.

“Keep your feet moving!” Ransom shouts.

I don’t question him; I just start to do a weird kind of tap dance on top of the damn snake as I pick my feet up as quickly as possible and run down the length of him trying to avoid him taking me into the lava with him as he dives.

“Evander, try to cool his feet down with your water,” Reed yells.

“On it!” Evander shouts back.

I immediately feel a cooling sensation around my boots, or at least what’s left of them. Thank fuck for that. I can’t slow down though because the damn snake is still diving and my only saving grace is that it’s so damn long that it’s taking a long time to dive.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Reed jump into the air to try to get me, but any time that he starts to fly in my direction, one of the other snakes dives for him and forces him away. Griff immediately launches himself in the air to help Reed, and also try to get to me, but having someone else in the air seems just to piss them off more and the lava snakes double their attack.

Ransom starts to chant, throwing spells in order to help them and me, while Doc and Raiden call out directions to both Ransom and Evander so that they can switch quickly between those who need the most help.

I'm running out of snake, and there is no way that I'm going to make the jump back to the rock from here, and even if I do, it just means that we're back where we started, stuck on a tiny rock island like sitting ducks. Neith is also on a trial, and although I trust that Mabel was telling the truth, we have no real way of knowing if it's going to bring up painful things from her past again. The thought of her struggling and being alone pisses me off. We need to get this over and done with.

"Watch out!" Raiden yells, urgently, panic heavy in his voice.

I glance to the side to see a snake, mouth open wide heading straight for Reed, there is absolutely no way that he can move out of the way in time.

I'm done with this. I can see Raiden is about to shift and give away his power, and I am not going to let that happen. I'm reasonably sure, thanks to some strange instinct that I have, that I may be able to stop this. I just have to make sure that I aim the command at the snakes and not the guys. The last thing I need is for them to be incapacitated as well.

That would also be a really big giveaway for everyone watching what I'm capable of. Although it's going to be anyway. I shake my head, now is not the time to let my thoughts get away with me.

"Enough!" I say firmly, I don't even raise my voice.

The alpha power in it snaps out around me, and the creature about to consume Reed freezes and then flops down into the lava, causing a giant wave.

The snake that I'm on stops diving and stays still so that I won't fall off, and the scales beneath my feet cool so that I don't have to keep moving on them like an idiot.

"What the fuck?" Griff is the first to exclaim.

I just shrug. We need to be really fucking careful what we say right now. Most supes watching will be speculating on who has got the lava snakes under control. Whoever they decide that it is, the supes watching will also know that they are stronger than they should be. For some of us, that wouldn't be a big deal, it would only be mildly surprising, but for others it could cause issues.

Ransom would probably be the most likely choice for them to assume has managed to get control over the lava snakes, since he's a warlock. However, if anyone realizes that I did it, and I used the alpha voice to do so, then that could cause issues with Ahren and his shifters at the least. But there's nothing I can do about it now, and I'm going to need to use my alpha voice more in order to get us over to the bank and out of here.

My gaze moves to Ransom, and he winks, as he starts to wave his hands around dramatically and chant absolute bullshit. It may not fool everyone, but it will definitely trick the majority, and that's better than nothing. The other guys quickly catch on to what he's doing and start to add their own distractions in as well.

"Can we land?" Griff asks me.

I nod, "Yeah, I don't know what's happened, but the scales are cool here."

The lava around us is as still as it was before the snakes appeared, and the one that I'm standing on won't go anywhere unless I say so. Reed and Griff cautiously land next to me, and the cool scales expand so that they aren't going to burn either.

"I need to get closer to the head so that it can hear me better if I speak quietly," I mutter, hoping that they will be able to hear me.

"You could just start walking, maybe the cool scales will go with you?" Griff suggests. "Or actually run, or it's going to take us forever."

## Chapter Ten

### River

Ishrug. It's worth a go. With the others on the rock still doing their thing to try to distract whoever is watching, I take off at a run. Reed and Griff launch themselves back into the air and follow me from there. I put on a burst of speed and then launch myself toward its head, landing in a crouch. With my head still bowed from where I landed, I say quietly, "Thank you. Pick up the others from the rock and then take us over to the shore to safety."

It begins to move immediately, and I stand up, finding my balance. I may be using my alpha voice, but that doesn't mean that I have to be a dick about it. When we get to the guys, Van raises his eyebrow questioningly, and I tilt my head to the side slightly in acknowledgement of his question, the movement telling him and the others that it's safe to climb on board. They cautiously climb onto the snake's head, and then the snake immediately starts to take us toward the shore, and the closest point to the glowing dot in the distance. The dot that we are assuming is the portal to take us back home.

Everyone is silent as the snake's body weaves from side to side behind us in the lava, keeping its head above the lava and ensuring our safety. Ransom carries on chanting and moving his hands in a similar way to the way that normal warlocks use their power, and I smirk. He's pretty fucking awesome for making sure that people are at least confused about who has managed to control the lava snakes.

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When we get off on the bank, Ransom positions himself next to me so that when the snake bows its head, it looks like it's bowing to him and not just me. It then dives back under the lava and disappears.

Once it's gone, I turn around to face the others, and we all share a look. I can see it in their expressions that they desperately want to ask me all sorts of questions, but we are all very aware that we're being filmed, and so everyone wisely keeps their mouths shut.

"Good job, man," Van says, clapping Ransom on the back.

"Thanks," Ransom smiles, looking amused. "I am so ready to get out of here. Let's find that portal and get back to the castle."

"Agreed," Reed says.

We all head into the trees that are lining the bank. From what we could see from our vantage point on the rock in the middle of the lake, the portal is somewhere in these trees. At least we are assuming that it's a portal, for all we know it could be a trap or another fucking level to this trial or something. We saw Neith's last trial, obviously, and she had multiple levels to pass in one trial, so it's not entirely unheard of, and it could be what's happening here.

I really fucking hope it's not though.

I'm sore, I'm tired, and I know that I'm not the only one. I'm also really fucking hungry. I'm not used to using my alpha magic, which is completely separate from my



usual magic. It has made me feel a lot more tired than I usually would, but the effects of using it are already lessening, even though that was only the second time that I used it. So I am pretty sure that the next time that I use my alpha magic, it will be as easy and have as little effect on me and my energy levels as my usual magic does.

The problem with seeing that the portal was in the trees from the rock platform, is that it looked a lot closer than it actually is. We have to trek further than I thought we would have to.

“Are we sure it’s even in this direction?” I ask after we’ve been walking for a while.

Ransom shrugs, “Well, it looked like it was. It’s possible that it may have moved.”

Griff nods in agreement, “Give me a second, and I will fly up and see if I can see anything.”

“Be careful,” Van warns.

We stop moving as Griff takes off through the trees, and wait until he lands again before we start walking again, just because we don’t want to lose sight of him.

As soon as he lands, he smiles, “It’s literally just on the other side of those trees, and is definitely the portal.”

“Thank fuck,” Doc grins.

We all take off at a jog and don’t stop when we see the portal, heading straight through it.

Neith

“They’re coming back,” I say in relief, slumping back against the couch.

Ribit squeezes my hand, “See? I told you that they would be fine. They are crazy strong. I have never seen an alpha with the strength of yours, those lava snakes should not be able to be controlled by an alpha, that’s not how it usually works.”

“Ah shit, that’s going to cause issues isn’t it?” I ask her.

“It shouldn’t do. I mean, he’s already the alpha of his territory, so I shouldn’t imagine that it will change anything,” she replies, trying to reassure me.

I shake my head and grimace, “He’s not the alpha of his territory, and he has no desire to be.”

“Well shit,” she replies. “In that case, yeah. I would think that whoever is in charge of the territory that you guys live in is going to have something to say. But your warlock was working really hard at making sure that people thought that it was him who had gained control of the beasts. I would have thought that it was him if you hadn’t said River and looked at your alpha.”

“Really? Or are you just trying to reassure me?” I ask, raising my eyebrow and imploring her to give me an honest answer.

She chuckles, “I don’t do that. I tell it how it is. I’m not saying that someone might not have noticed, but I am saying that I wouldn’t have if I hadn’t had you next to me.”

I sigh, “Okay, thanks, Ribit. You won’t say anything?”

She shakes her head, “No, I wouldn’t anyway, but remember no one but you can actually make out what I’m saying.”

“Oh yeah,” I reply, frowning slightly. It must be really lonely not being able to talk to anyone. “I will come back and see you soon.”

She smiles, “You better. Now go and check on your men. They didn’t look like they were in the best of shape, and I’m sure that they will be worrying about you and how your trial went.”

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“Thank you for staying with me,” I say gratefully, as I stand up.

She smiles, “Any time.”

With a final wave, I head out of the door, ready to go and find my men and make sure that they’re okay. I also want to see just how much trouble River could be in if someone else picked up on the fact that he could use his alpha voice on beasts that he really shouldn’t be able to. I know that Ahren knows exactly how strong River is, or at least that River is stronger than he is, but if Ribit is right, then he just showed a level of alpha magic that goes way beyond that.

I know Ahren. I have known him for years, and I know that he would be fine with it, especially since River has no intention of taking over the packs in Ahren’s territory, but Ahren’s beta is an absolute asshole and will insist on things being handled the traditional way regardless. I have never understood why Ahren keeps him around other than the fact that it’s just how the packs work, and that despite his faults, he is a good beta. Apparently.

He’s an asshole. One that has always had a problem with me and has ignored me completely because I am human and therefore beneath him. Even if I were a supernatural, he would still have a problem with me because I’m a woman. I am friends with the woman who ranks just underneath him and has almost as much power as he does, and yet he will only acknowledge her existence in front of Ahren.

Ahren is aware of the shit he does, but because he hasn’t crossed the line and is only playing with it, his hands are tied. The beta dick is incredibly good at toeing that line. The last time that I was at the compound, I couldn’t help but notice that although the

other shifters gave him respect, very few actually liked him, and there was a sense of relief whenever he left a room.

He's a dick.

If he has noticed that River controlled the lava snakes, then Ahren is going to have a hard time convincing him to rein in his reaction.

As I pass the portrait of my parents, I wave at them and then feel like an utter idiot for doing so. Thankfully, I'm the only one up here, so I don't have to worry about anyone else seeing me make an idiot of myself. It's amazing how many times I find myself grateful that no one can see me because I've done something ridiculous.

As I get to the bottom of the staircase, I frown when I realize that the doors are closed. I can't remember closing them, but that doesn't mean that I didn't. I had other things on my mind when I came up here. If I'm being honest, I have other things on my mind now, I want to get to the guys to see if they're okay. It's because of this reason that I don't pause for long, or at all, actually, I just carry on my forward trajectory and open the doors.

That was a mistake.

As soon as I step through the door, I find myself in some kind of woodland. It's still nighttime, the same as it was at the castle, so I'm hoping that means that we're in the same realm, but realistically, it doesn't mean anything at all, and I could be anywhere.

I frown as I look around the seemingly quiet woodland and call Asael to me just in case. I can't see anything that would immediately say that I'm in danger, and I didn't feel the usual tug of the portal when I stepped through the door, but as I said before, I was really focused on checking on the guys, and I could have just not been paying

enough attention. I never expected to get pulled into another trial on the same day that I've just done one.

No one warned us that it could happen, but then again, maybe they didn't warn us because it was just one of those things that they couldn't tell us about?

It doesn't matter. I'm here now, and I need to figure out what is being asked of me so I can pass the trial and get back to check on the guys. Up ahead I see a slight break in the trees and I make my way toward it, my feet come to a sudden stop as I realize that the break in the trees is actually because I'm on the top of some kind of cliff, one more step and I would have plummeted to my death.

It does give me a fantastic view though, and in the distance, I can see what I am almost one hundred percent sure is the castle. I figure that there's only one way to know for sure, and that's to start to head in that direction. For all I know, that could be the trial, just to head back to the castle.

"Oh yeah, because the trials have been that easy," my sarcastic inner voice replies.

I tell her to fuck off and ignore the fact that the voices decided to murmur in what I could only describe as agreement with her.

I begin to push forward through the trees, and one thing is for absolute certain, there hasn't been anyone out in this part of the woods for a really long time. Not regular people anyway, there are no well-worn trails here, and no sign of anything other than animals. It's really nice actually and there's a sense of peace to it that I find relaxing instead of worrying.

After I have been walking for only a couple of minutes, a sound pierces the night. It's not very loud, but it immediately has me freezing in place. It sounds like something is in pain, a lot of pain. I calm my heart rate and slow my breathing as I make sure that I

don't move at all, so that I can hear what direction it's coming from if it comes again.

As I wait, it does occur to me that I have heard distress sounds coming from the woods before, and those were to lure me to what should have been my death, but actually turned out to be one of the best friendships I have ever had.

I love Mael.

This sounded different from that. When the kelpies tried to lure me in, they used the sound of a distressed human. I have only heard this sound once so far, but it was very definitely an animal, and one that was in pain. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind about that. Although there was no doubt in my mind that it was a human who was in distress and needed help back at the guy's house, I really should approach this with caution.

Of course, because of who I am, the second that the panicked sound of pain happens again, I take off in the direction that the sound is coming from instead of thinking about it a bit more. I'm not stupid though, so I do move through the trees as quietly and quickly as I can, making sure that I don't announce my presence just in case it's being attacked, or it is a trick again.

The deeper that I head into the woods, the more I realize that it is a lot further away than I initially thought it was. That could mean that I'm being led into a trap, but the sounds that are coming sporadically are so filled with pain and panic that I can't turn back now. I just can't. My lips twitch with amusement as I briefly imagine that the guys are going to have a lot to say about my apparent need to follow unknown noises deeper into the woods. I almost feel like waving or winking at them since I know that they're watching, but I'm pretty sure that makes them even more nervous when I do that. So for now, I refrain and focus on what I'm doing and getting to this poor creature as quickly as I possibly can without making too much noise.

As yet another cry sounds around me, I put on a burst of speed. I need to get to it.

The voices give me a warning, and I slow down, moving at a walk and slowly advancing forward as I round a tree. I see what's making the noise, and when my eyes find the creature, I can barely believe my eyes.

At the base of a huge ancient oak tree, next to a rushing river and caught in what looks to be similar to a giant bear trap is a goddamn fucking unicorn.

They're rare, like really fucking rare, and if I'm being honest everything unicorn related that I have seen at the Obsidian Market I have just assumed is there for gullible customers and is definitely not the real thing. I really didn't think that they existed, and yet right here in front of me is undeniable proof.

It's fucking huge. I mean, I would have to guess that it's even bigger than Mael and he's pretty fucking massive. To be fair, on closer inspection, I don't think it would be too much bigger, but its size is even more impressive thanks to the huge, wickedly sharp black horn that is protruding from its head. It fucking glitters and it's probably one of the most magical things that I have seen, and yes I am aware that I am surrounded by a lot of magical shit, but there's just something about seeing a unicorn that makes everything pale in comparison. At least in this moment it does.



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Its fur is as black as you can get and almost seems to absorb the light around it, and its mane and tail have threads of gold, silver, and copper threading through it and adding to the general sparkle that encompasses the whole of it, the sparkle that is beginning to fade.

I know nothing about unicorns, not about the creatures. I don't know about their likes or dislikes, I don't know about their habitats or what they eat, and I don't even know what their gifts are. However, I do know from the stories told at the Obsidian Market that they are fierce fighters, extremely deadly, and they like to live far away from other people and supernaturals. I thought all of this was just tall tales that the dealers told everyone to make their wares seem more legitimate, and it must have worked because they were never short of customers.

Anger threads through me as I think about the kinds of things that they were selling. Unicorn horns were sold for millions of dollars, but that was nothing compared to the blood. The shimmering gold blood that was sold in tiny two-milliliter bottles was sold for tens of millions, and I'm not even exaggerating. They were nearly always sold out and had a waitlist of customers who wanted them.

I always thought it was fucking insane.

Looking at this creature now, my anger grows at the fuckers that could hurt these beautiful creatures, they're a dying breed, brought to near extinction thanks to being hunted and because of the magic that their blood and horns carry.

Huh, I guess I knew more about them than I thought I did. I frown, I don't know how, I really did think that they were the stuff of fairytales and legend.

Another pained sound snaps me out of my confusion. The unicorn is really badly hurt, and I need to get its leg out of the giant bear trap that is clamped down on it, and has torn into its leg, making it bleed.

Fuck.

Whoever has set that trap has definitely done it in the hopes of catching a unicorn and will be back to check their traps. I have no idea how long I have to free it, but I do know that I need to do it as quickly as I possibly can. I know that it is probably going to attack me. It's in pain and it is fucking terrified, and since I have no idea what kind of magic it has I could be dead the moment that it sees me, but I can't walk away. I can't leave it in pain, and I can't leave it to its fate, which is very definitely death and an extremely painful death as well.

## Chapter Eleven

Neith

One thing that I do know is that the blood from magical creatures that is valuable has to be extracted when they are still alive, otherwise it loses its magic, and they will drain a creature dry, making sure that they get every single drop, which is an incredibly painful process for the creature. I see no reason why it would be different for unicorns.

Beginning to move forward, I freeze before I make it around the edge of the giant tree that I'm hiding behind, and glance at Asael in my hand. It is a massive risk to walk out there without him in my hands, he's pretty much the only defense that I have since my magic is still really only a slight trickle and nothing that I will be able to use to attack or defend myself with if this does turn out to be a trap of some kind, or if the unicorn itself attacks me.

However, if I were injured and trapped and some stranger came out from behind a tree wielding a sword, I know that I would be even less likely to trust that person and probably go into full panic mode as well. I would be almost certain that they were the person who set the trap in the first place, even if they tried to reassure me that they weren't.

People lie.

Hunted people, or in this case, creatures, are even more sensitive to that and just assume that everyone is lying to them.

I want to help this unicorn as quickly as I can, and in order to do that, I need it to trust me just a little bit.

With this in mind, I ask Asael to disappear, but to be ready in case I need him with seconds to spare. He buzzes in my hand and then does as I have asked.

Now that he is gone, and my hands are empty, I cautiously move forward, and the unicorn's head immediately snaps in my direction. It panics, trying to get away and tearing the teeth of the trap deeper into its leg.

I hold my hands up, "Whoa, steady. I'm not going to hurt you. I know you probably don't believe that, and to be honest, I wouldn't either, but I promise you I don't intend to hurt you. I want to help you before whoever did this to you comes back."

I have absolutely no idea if it can understand me or not, but if it can't, I'm hoping that it will interpret the gentle way that I'm speaking and my body language to mean that I don't intend to hurt it.

It must understand what I'm saying to a certain extent because it stills, watching me with fear, and such exhaustion that I don't know whether it believes me or if it has

just given up, and that breaks my heart. I move toward it cautiously, and keep my eyes on it as I crouch down. I can't risk kneeling since I'm not going to be able to get away quickly if it decides to stab me with its horn, and although it is a supernatural, it is still an animal, and hurt animals behave unpredictably, especially when they aren't sure if you are helping them.

I decide that the best way to help gain its trust, and to stop it from attacking me, is to talk to it and since I am the queen of talking absolute shit that's what I do.

"Oh, this looks really bad," I wince. "I mean, you probably didn't need me to tell you that, you can feel it, so you know that it's pretty bad. If you're squeamish though, definitely don't look at it."

I glance at its face, and I swear that it raises its eyebrows at me, but I'm pretty sure that at this point, I'm imagining things. So, I carry on talking.

"I'm going to talk through everything that I try to do to make sure that you know what I'm doing. I hope that you can understand me, but if not, that's fine. I'm still going to tell you," I explain as I lean closer, and it tenses. "It's okay, I just need to see how I can approach this. We need to do it quickly. I want you out of here before whoever did this comes back to check their barbaric trap."

I lean forward again, and this time it stays still, once again allowing me to inspect where the teeth of the bear trap are going into its leg.

"Okay, so I'm going to take my jacket off and wrap it around the teeth on either side, here and here," I explain as I point to the place where I intend to hold onto. "Then I'm going to try to pry it apart. It's going to hurt, it's pretty fucking deep in your leg, and because of that it's going to hurt like a mother fucker to pull it out. Hopefully, my plan will work, and once you're free, your healing will hopefully kick in. If not, I should be able to clean and bandage it for you, and then you can get out of here as

quickly as possible.” I pause and frown slightly as I add, “To be honest, if you’re up to it, as soon as I free you, just run. I am really worried about the people who set this coming back for you.”

Looking at the unicorn, who seems to be listening intently, I add, “Got it?”

It surprises me when it nods, but I smile and thank my lucky stars that it can understand me because it makes this so much easier.

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“I’m going to try to pull it apart now, okay?” I say. It nods again, and I position myself at the bear trap, wrapping my hands in my jacket to try to protect them as much as I possibly can, even though I know that the spikes are most likely going to go through and pierce my skin. “I am really sorry that this is going to hurt.”

There’s no time to build it up slowly, and I ask my magic to help as I dig my feet into the ground and start to pull the thing apart. It doesn’t budge at all, not even a tiny bit. I frown. I’m not giving up, I can’t give up. This unicorn's life depends on it. I pull harder, feeling the spikes of the trap where I’m gripping it begin to dig into my fingers, slicing them and causing the blood to soak my jacket. I don’t pause, I don’t stop, I keep pulling at it with all my strength.

It finally begins to shift, the teeth moving the most minuscule amount that it can, but it fucking moves.

“It’s moving,” I tell the unicorn, the excitement obvious in my voice.

The volume of the voices rises in warning, and I curse as I hear a stick snap in the surrounding woods.

“Shit.” I look at the unicorn, “I’m not going to be able to get you free before they arrive, but I promise that I will not let them near you.”

I don’t have time to wait to see if it understands me, because three heavily armed mercenaries burst out of the trees. I’m not really surprised that I recognize one of them from the Obsidian Market. It makes sense that they hunt the unicorns themselves rather than send someone else to do it for them. With unicorns being

worth as much as they are, the temptation for anyone who would be willing to work with these people would be too great, and they would most likely take it for themselves, rather than accept a percentage.

“Well, well, what do we have here, boys?” one of them says almost predictably.

I roll my eyes as I stand up and position myself between the unicorn and them.

“Looks like a little girl who thinks she can steal what is ours,” another one replies, his eyes trailing over me lecherously.

I don’t react to his obvious perusal. If I show that it bothers me, then it will just give him more pleasure. Men like this are all the same, whether they’re supernaturals or not.

Vile.

“I think I’d like to teach her a lesson, a naked one,” another one says, grabbing his crotch and spitting.

“Oh, gross,” I mutter, pulling a disgusted face.

The men laugh.

“You think we care, we ain’t asking, we intend to take,” the first one says.

The unicorn whinnies in distress, and I hear it try to move behind me.

Glancing over my shoulder at it, I smile, “Don’t worry, I’ve got this.”

The men once again laugh and move closer to me. Now, at this point, I know that I

should be worrying, a normal person would be, especially after what they are threatening. The thing is, they are nothing. They're weak, and I am so fucking fired up about what they have done to this unicorn and what they intend to do, that they don't stand a fucking chance.

Out of the corner of my eye I see the one that grabbed his dick move toward me swiftly and the unicorn begins to panic. I know that I said earlier that it makes the guys more nervous when I wink at them in situations like this, but I can't help but wink at the unicorn who probably understands the gesture about as well as I understand unicorn speak.

Just as the dick grabber reaches me I spin on my heel, calling Asael to me and grin as I watch the brief flash of surprise appear on his features before his head drops to the floor with a thud. The other two that came with him just stare at me in utter shock, clearly not expecting me to be capable of killing someone.

"Fuck, it's that chick off the Choosing," one of them exclaims, and my eyebrows rise slightly.

Huh, I don't know why it's a surprise to me that criminals have watched the Choosing. I mean, everyone has access to it, all they have to do is say a simple incantation, at least that's what Ribit did so that we could watch it. But it does surprise me that they have recognized me, then again I am the only woman in it.

I rush forward. I really don't have the time to be thinking about this sort of shit now. My quick movement unfortunately snaps them out of their shock at their friend's death and they both work together to try to circle around me so that they can attack me from both sides as they draw their swords. There is absolutely no chance that I'm going to allow them to get close to the unicorn though. I know that if one of them manages to get behind me then they will take the opportunity to take off with the unicorn and I will have absolutely no chance of being able to find it again.



I really couldn't forgive myself if I let them get past me and take the unicorn. The poor creature has been through enough, and I will absolutely not allow it to go through anything else if I can help it. Fortunately for me, I am used to going up against more than one person in a sword fight and so I quickly get my head into the game and within moments I am dodging, weaving, spinning, and stabbing. One of them quickly succumbs to my sword and falls to the floor as dead as the dick grabber. The last one left alive doubles down on his attack and I quickly ask Asael to split so that I can defend myself better. It's obvious by the slightly erratic movements of the last attacker, that he's beginning to tire and if I'm being honest with myself so am I.

It's because of this that I don't block the next swing that's aimed at me and barely manage to dodge out of the way so that it doesn't slice my stomach open. Instead of seeing my insides become outsides, I manage to move just enough that it slices along my hip instead and I hiss in pain, but don't let it distract me, and use his moment of triumph against him as I stab him in the stomach with one sword and then pull it upwards.

Asael is so sharp that it takes barely any effort on my part and as the fucker looks down in shock at his stomach, my other sword swings around and takes off his head, hearing the splash as it lands in the fast-flowing waters of the river. The water will take the head away quickly and it saves me the job of having to separate the head from the body in order to make sure that he doesn't put himself back together again.

I don't even wait to see it go. I know that he is dead. Glancing around the clearing, I listen intently, stretching my senses to see if there are any more threats nearby. I don't pick up on anything, but that doesn't mean that there isn't anything nearby. I quickly send Asael away and then turn back to the unicorn.

"Are you okay?" I ask, as I rush over to it. It snorts and looks at me like I'm crazy. Which considering it's just seen me fight and kill three supernaturals and I'm currently bleeding, might be a fair assessment.

I glance down at my hip, it's not that bad. I'll live.

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“We need to get you out of here as quickly as possible. I have no idea if any of them called for help supernaturally or not, or if there are more on the way. I don’t want to risk it,” I look over the trap on its leg as it watches me curiously. It must be magic dampening in some way and that’s why the unicorn hasn’t used any magic. I revert back to talking it through everything that I’m doing in the hopes that it’s reassuring the unicorn and not making it think that I am absolutely insane. “The question is how am I going to get you out without causing you unnecessary pain? Because let’s face it, I’m pretty sure that I only thought that it was moving earlier and it actually wasn’t.”

The unicorn huffs, and seems like it’s saying your guess is as good as mine. The voices mutter, but they don’t seem to be saying anything of any significance, they’re just there in the background. So it’s no good hoping that they might help me, or even speak like they did when I asked them about my parents or when I was in the cell.

I spend longer than I would like staring at the trap digging into the unicorn’s leg, before it finally clicks.

Asael.

He is wickedly sharp and if anything can cut through the metal of the trap, it’s going to be him. Especially since the metal most likely has magical properties to it which means that anything else that I try probably won’t work. I do need to make sure that I explain my plan clearly and carefully to the unicorn because the last thing that I want to do is to freak it out and make it injure itself or me. If I break the trap and it spooks him, his first reaction is going to be for him to attack. Which, to be honest, I would probably react the same way if I were in its position.

I keep calling it a him, but I have no idea if that's true and I'm not about to check.

Turning my attention away from the trap, I look back at the unicorn, "Okay, so I've had an idea, and I really don't want you to panic so I'm going to explain it to you," I begin to explain, and it tilts its head to the side as if it's listening to me. I carry on explaining my idea as quickly as I can, "As you probably saw, I have an enchanted sword, and I think that the only chance that I have to get this fucking bear trap off you is to use him to cut through the enchanted metal of the trap. At least that's the plan, I have no idea if it will work or not, but I think that it's our best shot."

I look at the unicorn expectantly, and it hesitantly nods its head once.

Trying to smile reassuringly, I call Asael to me and then speak to him, so he hopefully knows what I'm asking of him.

"Alright, Az, I need you to cut through the metal of the trap." I study it for a second and then point, "I think here should release the mechanism. If it doesn't, then we're going to have to cut it closer to the unicorn's leg, and I really don't want to do that if we can help it. Understood?" Asael buzzes in my hand, and I smile. Looking back at the unicorn, I add, "I'm going to cut the mechanism of the trap now. If it does free you, try to move really carefully and allow yourself enough time to heal at least a little bit before you get up and leave, it's in there really deep."

I hope that the unicorn has understood me because it just risks hurting itself more and prolonging its time to get to safety if it tries to leave immediately. I really don't want to waste any more time than I already have, so I crouch down near the trap, but not too close, and work on the mechanism of the trap with Asael. It sparks as his magic interferes with the magic that is blocking the unicorns and probably strengthening the trap itself as well, but thankfully, the unicorn doesn't react and panic.

A huge amount of relief courses through me when the trap springs open and the

unicorn stays where it is. Working quickly, I cut a slice of fabric off my shirt and then send Asael away again, after I have thanked him.

“I know that you probably don’t need this, but we don’t want any of that blood getting anywhere, and being used for nefarious reasons, or anyone using it to locate you with a spell or even follow you. So I’m going to wrap the wounds, I’m really sorry if this hurts you,” I explain, and then quickly get to work wrapping the wound.

Once that’s done, I head to the river, moving around the bodies of the men I killed, and I thoroughly wash any sign of the unicorn blood off me. I then spend far longer than I would have liked to searching around for a leaf that’s sturdy enough and big enough so that I can carry a decent amount of water in it. Once I’ve finally found one, I turn back around and see the unicorn standing up and watching me closely, to be honest, I’m really surprised that it didn’t immediately take off as soon as it realized that it could stand, but as I get a closer look I realize that it is keeping the majority of its weight off the bad leg, so maybe it can’t quite move yet.

I smile, “I’m glad you’re up. I’m just going to clean the blood off the trap and off the ground. For the same reasons that I bandaged your leg.”

It watches me closely as I do exactly what I told it that I was going to do, and I have to assume that it’s watching me to make sure that I don’t take any of its blood for myself. I have absolutely no desire to take any, it’s not mine to take. It’s as simple as that. Once I’m done and I make sure that there’s absolutely no trace of the unicorn, I stand there and frown at the trap left behind. I washed it, but I’m not sure whether there would be anything minute left behind, like trace evidence or something that someone would be able to use in a spell to trace the unicorn.

Especially since this is a Choosing task, so I’m being watched and someone is going to recognize this place, they just are, and the temptation will be too strong for many supes. They won’t do what I’m doing, and most will want to see if the unicorn is still

here, or if they can find some trace of it that would allow them to track it. There are a lot of desperate people out there, and desperate people do desperate and dangerous things.

## Chapter Twelve

### Neith

The average supernatural would not be able to track and trap a unicorn. They aren't cute and fluffy, they aren't docile creatures like most human lore portrays them to be, I know that much.

If they were easy to catch after all, then they would most likely be extinct by now, and not just rare and sought after.

All of these thoughts rush through my mind in a matter of seconds, and helps me come to the conclusion that I would rather be safe than sorry. Especially in this situation, and because of that, I bend down and pick up the heavy remains of the bear trap-looking thing and then hoist it down to the river. The whole time that I'm doing this, the unicorn watches me with what I can only describe as a perplexed look. I would explain to it what I'm doing, but in a moment's time, it's going to be pretty self-explanatory anyway.

Plus, I am kind of hoping that it stays around for a little bit longer just because it's a fucking unicorn and is most likely the only one that I will ever see in my lifetime. Even if I get extra years as a supernatural. I am actually really surprised that it has stuck around for this long, and I'm worried that if I speak to it to explain, then it will remember that it's still here when it doesn't need to be and run away.

Refocusing on my task and not thoughts of the unicorn running away from me, I put the broken pieces down by the edge of the river. It's really fucking deep and is

moving really quickly. Which means that it will be pretty difficult for anyone to get to the bottom of it to fish these pieces out, and that by the time that they do, there will be no usable evidence on the pieces of the bear trap anyway.

Just as I'm about to throw the first piece into the fast-flowing water, a thought occurs to me.

Shit.

This is a Supernatural Realm, and there are most likely water supernaturals of some kind in the river, and they may be able to get something off the trap before it disappears.

I am aware that I am overthinking this.

Placing the piece back down, I get another one of those big leaves and gather some more water, bringing it back and completely drowning the pieces of the bear trap, and hopefully washing off any trace evidence. I then pick the pieces up one by one since they're really fucking heavy, and then throw them as hard as I can into the river, watching them sink out of sight. When the last one has disappeared, I turn around and I have to admit that I am once again pretty fucking surprised that the unicorn is still there.

"I think I have gotten rid of any trace of you now," I tell it since it's actually here. "You can go now, it's still not safe here. I have absolutely no trace of you on me either, so you don't need to worry about me taking something that doesn't belong to me." I turn in a slow circle to show it.

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I can hardly believe my eyes when, instead of turning away from me and escaping like it probably should, it starts to approach me cautiously. Instinct tells me to stay still. This creature is incredibly dangerous, but at the same time, it hasn't hurt me yet.

As it approaches, I realize that it's dark as night coat is actually fucking glittering, I become even more aware of its size and it's deadly and incredibly sharp looking horn. It's bigger than Mael, for certain, and probably just as deadly. One thing is for sure, as soon as I get the chance, I am doing as much research as I possibly can into unicorns. I bet Raiden knows some interesting facts. He's probably watching this and getting ready to ask me thousands of questions, which I'm going to try my best to answer.

Of course, that's assuming that they're back from their task and watching. I roll my eyes at my thoughts. I'm clearly a lot more nervous than I thought I was at the approaching unicorn because I know for a fact that the guys are back. That's where I was going before I got pulled here.

Right, that's enough of being stuck in my stupid and clearly confused thoughts.

It's been a long day, a long week, actually. I don't think anyone would blame me for my mental confusion. Fortunately, no one but me can hear my mental confusion.

I'm still fucking rambling.

My thoughts are stopped dead in their tracks as the unicorn comes close enough to touch. It slowly lowers its head, in an almost similar way that Mael did. I'm cautious, it could be about to stab me, but I don't need to be. It gently nudges my cheek in a



soft greeting, and my smile is so wide my cheeks hurt.

I know that I am never going to get the chance to do this again. This is literally a once in a lifetime situation. Because of this, I slowly lift my hand and stroke the side of its face, and it leans into the touch, clearly enjoying it. Much like Mael, I highly doubt that the creature ever feels a soft touch from people like me, and I'm glad that I can give that to it.

After a few more magical moments, I sigh.

"This is really amazing, but you should get going. I don't want anyone else to come and find you," I say softly, if not incredibly reluctantly.

The unicorn snorts, which makes an unexpected giggle escape me because it tickles my cheek. It doesn't step back like I expected it to though and instead it moves so that its head is resting against mine, my head just below its horn. It has to bend so low that it is practically kneeling on its front legs to do so. I feel a tingle of magic at the place where its head touches mine, and I try not to let the feeling alarm me too much. The voices aren't screaming at me in warning, and even the small amount of magic that I have access to isn't doing anything that would concern me. Of course, that doesn't really mean anything because my magic is elusive at best.

The magic from the unicorn seems to flow over me and then gathers on the inside of my left wrist. It doesn't hurt, it tingles. The unicorn nudges my face gently one more time and then steps back. It looks pointedly at my wrist, and I take that as a sign that I need to see what the magic has done.

On the inside of my wrist is what I can only describe as a tattoo, apart from it looks like no tattoo that I have ever seen before. It's not in black ink, or even colored, at least not a color that I have ever seen. It's pearlescent and shimmery. I pull my wrist closer to my face so that I can get a better look.

My eyes widen, “Oh my fuck, it’s fucking glittery, that is so cool.”

The unicorn snorts in what I can easily identify as amusement, but I’m too busy studying the tattoo and the pretty ink. It’s a replica of the unicorn’s horn, with vines and even a couple of flowers around it.

It’s absolutely stunning.

I have no idea what it means, and although I could ask the unicorn, it’s not like it’s actually going to be able to tell me.

I guess it’s just something else that we’re going to have to research. I say we because I know that Raiden, if not all of the guys, are going to want to research this, if they don’t already know.

The unicorn whinnies, gaining my attention, and I feel the same kind of magic that put the mark on my wrist build in the air. A thick, supple leather cuff appears on my wrist that completely covers the mark on the inside.

I nod and glance back up at the unicorn, “Alright, message received. Don’t show anyone. Can I show my most trusted?”

The unicorn whinnies in agreement and nods, then bends its head so that I can stroke its nose again before it finally takes off. I watch as it disappears, marveling at the way that it moves with such ease. There’s absolutely no sign of pain or fatigue from its ordeal.

I glance down at the bracelet. I desperately want to look at the tattoo underneath it again, but I acknowledge that it may not be a good idea to do that right this moment when I am most definitely still being filmed. I mean, there’s a good chance that everyone has seen it anyway, but there is also a small chance that the unicorn did

some kind of magic or something that meant that anyone watching couldn't see. So instead, I ignore it.

Looking around, I can't help frowning as I realize that a portal hasn't shown up. So far, every time that I have finished a task, the portal has shown up to take me back to the castle. But this time it hasn't, does that mean that my task isn't over yet? I glance down at the slice on my hip, I really hope not because I'm pretty fucking tired now, and not only is my hip now causing me pain since the immediate threat is over and I can feel it now, but the poultice that I put over my burn is no longer working as effectively as it was, and that's starting to cause me a bit of grief too.

It then occurs to me that I was actually heading in the direction of the castle when I came across the unicorn, so maybe the last part of the task is that I have to head back to the castle myself? I have no idea what the hell I'm supposed to do, if I'm being completely honest with myself, and I've got no feelings or anything like that which would tell me whether what I'm thinking is right or not, but I do know that I can't just stand here.

Someone could come looking for the unicorn at any moment now, and if they do, I do not want to be here. The trouble is, I can't quite remember what direction I was walking in, and I had been walking for a while before I came across the unicorn so I really don't want to have to turn around and go back to the point where I could see the castle through the trees to try and work out a way back.

Just as I'm deciding to head in a random direction and hope that it's the right way, my brain seems to switch back online, and I remember that I can use my tracking gift. It could easily take me back to the castle. As soon as the thought crosses my mind, a mental map appears, and I immediately know the way that I need to go.

As I start in the right direction, which as usual is the opposite direction that I was going to go, it occurs to me that I should be questioning the ease with which the

mental map comes to me, but quite honestly, I'm just grateful at this point. The map is showing that the castle is quite far away, and I'm not looking forward to the walk, but if it's the last thing that I need to do to pass this task and nothing else pops out of the trees and wants to attack me, then I'm okay with it.

After all, I did walk all the way from wherever it was that I got blown up to the guy's place after I had just died, which should have been impossible. I think I can handle the walk back to the castle, which isn't even that long now that I've compared it to that walk.

Winston said that he wouldn't be available for a while since he was going fuck knows where to try to talk to the people that had decided I couldn't know the basic things that I felt that I really should know in order to keep myself safe. He said that the other spirit guides would possibly be around though and I think that if I really needed them then they would turn up. That's how they work after all.

Hell. I think if I really needed help, then Winston would turn up as well.

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I frown, as I duck under a low branch, I really hope that I'm not going to need Winston or the other spirit guides because if I do, that means that shit really has hit the fan.

Typically, for me, as I continue to walk, my mind begins to wander. I am, of course, still paying attention to my surroundings just in case something tries to attack me or eat me, but my brain is busy making up a marching song, and I even find myself marching along to the little beat that I've made up in my head. It's only after I've been doing it for half an hour and have added in extravagant arm movements and some pretty nifty head nodding if I do say so myself, it's only then that I realize that this is Choosing task and that thousands of supernaturals, maybe more, are most likely watching me rock out to music that only I can hear, and thinking that I'm batshit insane.

I stop in the middle of the path that only I can see because there's no actual path here, and I'm following a map that, again, is something that only I am aware of. I tilt my head to the side slightly. I must look absolutely insane, but then again, that's nothing new for me. With that conclusion settled, I decide that I really don't care about everyone thinking I'm insane and carry along the visible only to me pathway, doing my dance and singing my song in my head, because quite frankly, it's helping. Life is far too short to be worrying about what others may or may not think, even as a supernatural with a long life, so I'm going to do what makes me happy, or what helps to get me through the tedious task of trying to get back to the damn castle.

I wonder if there is someone that I can talk to who would pass a message on to the Choosing for me, if the Choosing is even an entity that can communicate. I actually have no idea, and I have no idea how I would even begin to find someone who may

be able to answer that question.

Actually, I bet that Mabel would have a good idea and if not, Ribit definitely would, she's been hanging around the castle and the Choosing's for fuck knows how long. That's definitely something that I can ask her about if I remember and don't forget in approximately two point five seconds, when the next round of random thoughts crosses my brain.

Holy shit, I met a unicorn.

There it is.

Seriously though, I met and interacted with a mother fucking unicorn. Glancing down at my wrist in what I hope is not an obvious way, I can't help but have the urge to have another look at the design underneath my new, and now permanent, leather bracelet. It's a good job that I like, since I'm not going to be able to take it off around anyone other than the guys. At least that's what I'm assuming. The cuff wouldn't have appeared, and the unicorn wouldn't have looked at it so pointedly if I could just have the mark on show.

I am insanely curious about what it means. If it means anything, it could very well just be a thank you. Although I'm not sure why I would have to hide it if it was a thank you.

Huh, I'm sure I'll figure it out, with help of course.

Checking the mental map that I'm following, I frown when I realize that I am still so far away from the castle. I'm not going to lie, I do briefly consider calling on Mael to give me a lift back to the castle, but I stop myself because I don't want to take advantage of the fact that I can call on him. I also don't want thousands of supernaturals to know that I am bonded to a kelpie. It's not a common thing, and I

feel like it would be giving too much away. I don't want to put Mael in danger, and despite the fact that I am in the Choosing, I really don't want to gain more attention than I already have.

Having a kelpie bonded to you and not trying to eat you would be drawing too much attention. It's for those reasons that I won't call on Mael or the rest of the herd unless I really need to. Resigning myself to the long walk ahead, I carry on with my song and awesome dance moves, hoping that it's going to make the time go quicker.

Plot twist.

It won't.

Doc

"Where the hell is she?" I demand.

I've been patient, we all have. We've run through the list of excuses about where she could be, but I'm starting to lose it now. She's not fucking here.

"We should do the spell again," Griff suggests, holding it together as well as I am. "Maybe it just glitched the first time that we tried, and she is still on a trial for the Choosing?"

Evander frowns, "I don't think that the Choosing glitches, but at this point, I'm running out of ideas."

He doesn't waste any time as he quickly says the trigger words that should bring up the screen that allows us to watch the Choosing trials when we aren't in one ourselves. Again, nothing happens.

I run my hands through my hair, gripping it tightly and then letting go before I actually pull any out. The trial that we've just been through was difficult to say the least and fucking long. If it weren't for River, then we might not have made it out, and the fact that he did manage to get us out could mean trouble for him. Even though Ransom's quick thinking hopefully stopped the majority of people from realizing that it was River who was controlling the creatures. The fact that Ransom could control them would be incredibly impressive and let everyone know just how powerful he is, but it's not going to cause the same number of problems that it will if certain people realize what River is capable of.

Ransom can easily explain away how he was able to control the lava snakes. Either by saying that he had some spell potions that worked, or that we lent him power, or something along those lines, which would lessen how shocked people would be that he managed to do it. We are trying to keep our true strengths hidden unless we don't have a choice. Some of the things that Ransom can do he shouldn't be able to, just like the rest of us.

But River, that's a whole other story and one that wouldn't be easily explained away.

## Chapter Thirteen

Doc

We were all slightly surprised when we arrived back and Neith wasn't waiting for us, but we quickly realized that none of us had told her how to pull up the screen to watch the trials and to be honest, with her magic as limited as it currently is none of us are even sure that she will be able to trigger the spell. Because of this, we figured that she may not know that we're back. We were all heading out of the door in a rush to find her when Raiden pointed out that it might be best to heal those of us that needed to be healed first because if she didn't watch the trial then she would most likely freak the fuck out when she saw us covered in blood and obviously injured.



When we went to find her though after I had healed them all quicker than I think I've healed anyone before, in my need to see Neith and make sure that she's okay, she wasn't in her room or in the common area and she wasn't even up by the painting of her parents. We tried to get the screen up to see if she was still doing her trial, since in our rush to check on her, we had all seemed to temporarily forget that she was pulled into one. It didn't work though, and that brings us to now, standing in front of the portrait of her parents, which is a crazy development in itself, wondering where the hell she is.

We struggled while we were on the trial, knowing that she had just been through something so traumatic and that we couldn't be there for her because we had been pulled into another one. I know that Neith is strong, she's insanely fucking strong, and it's apparent that we are only just beginning to scratch the surface of the shit that she has been through and dealt with in her life. That's not the point however. Just because she's strong and she can deal with it doesn't mean that she should deal with it all by herself; she's not alone now. We're all here for her, and we all want her to lean on us.

None of us wanted to leave her alone, not after what she went through, and quite honestly, it was for our peace of mind as well as for her. I never want to experience that feeling of absolute hopelessness ever again. It's worse knowing that if it does happen again, that we still won't be able to help her. The only person, or should I say people, that can calm her down and pull her out of such a traumatic panic attack are Coen and Dimitri.

I never would have figured that out, but it's become increasingly clear that Coen has also kept quite a lot about himself and the sorts of things that he was up to from us. Even when we were all in school together, whenever he went back to the keep, we never returned with him, mostly because we had our own families to go back to or places that we needed to be, and he never invited us, we didn't mind at all. Everyone knows that the dragons are very particular about who they allow to see their keep.

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I'm now thinking that it was because he wanted to keep Neith and most likely Dimitri to himself, even back then Dimitri was making a name for himself although it was more as a vigilante rather than the incredibly dangerous criminal that has no moral compass whatsoever, and doesn't discriminate against who he's willing to harm and kill in order to get what he wants. I can't say that he was the only one back then keeping things to himself, I think we all were.

"Why don't we try to find Mabel?" Reed suggests his power is starting to build with his growing worry about Neith's whereabouts.

I wouldn't say that we're in complete panic mode yet, I mean it's getting close, but we're no good to Neith if we're panicking, and there's a good chance that she's napping somewhere or exploring the castle more because she got bored or something.

"Good idea," Van agrees. "Let's go and find Mabel and see if she knows anything."

"And if she doesn't?" I ask.

"Then I guess we go and find the Draconian team and see if they know anything. I would say that I don't think that Coen would do anything to hurt her, but we have no idea what kind of control Kylen has over him. We already know that he tried to make Coen fight her, and although Coen warned her, I don't want to risk it," Van replies.

"I agree," Reed replies firmly as we all head back down the stairs.

Raiden

As we get closer to the bottom of the stairs and the doors that will take us out onto the floor above Neith's, I glance back up when movement catches my eye from behind us, only to frown when there's no one there. I could have sworn that there was someone there, but there's definitely not now. I'm about to tap into my magic to see if there are any souls nearby when a different idea flashes through my mind, and I immediately forget about the movement.

Neith said that she could still feel my magic, which means that the tether that I put in place is, for some reason, still working and still holding her soul to this plane. I don't know why. It really shouldn't be, and I don't know whether it's going to cause any problems, or even if it's something that we should worry about. Right now, it doesn't seem to be causing any issues, and Neith doesn't mind, which makes me incredibly happy and means more to me than she will ever realize. It is on my list to look into when we get back to the house, and things settle down a bit after the Choosing, although I am not sure that they will settle down for a while.

I don't bother telling the guys what I'm up to, one because it will just waste time, and two because I'm not entirely sure that it will work. Calling on the part of my magic that I have only just begun to use again, I ask it to check the tether that I made to tether Neith's soul to her body. It was made necessary because she couldn't cross back over to the spirit after being there so recently and Wallace, one of Neith's spirit guides, told me that the only way that I would be able to save her was if I tapped into the other side of my magic, my stronger side, and the side that I shut down when I was just a child. So that's what I did.

The magic responds to my request with ease, and I smile. "Guys," I call out as I jog to catch up to them.

"Sorry, I didn't realize that you had fallen behind," Van says distractedly as he assumes that was why I was calling him.

“No, I just checked on the tether, since Neith said that she could still feel it,” I explain.

Everyone stops walking and turns back to look at me expectantly.

“Well?” Reed asks, his voice gruff.

“I couldn’t get much information at all, but her heart is still beating, and she is still tethered to this plane,” I explain, frowning when I realize that it’s actually not that much information. “That’s not really much more information than we had a moment ago, is it?”

“It’s something,” Ransom says. “Good thinking.”

“Ransom’s right. We now know that she’s alive, and that’s more information than we had a moment ago,” Griff adds.

“Yeah, good point,” I agree, although I can’t help but wish that I could find out more information from the tether. “Let’s go and find Mabel and see if she knows where Neith is.”

The guys all nod in agreement, and we carry on walking through the castle. Thankfully, it doesn’t take us long until we spot her coming out of one of the rooms on the ground floor.

I have to admit that I haven’t done any exploring of the castle, so I have no idea what room she’s coming out of, and quite frankly, I don’t care. Not right now, at least.

“Mabel,” Doc calls, and she turns to look at us, smiling happily.

“Good evening, boys,” she greets us, and then frowns when she sees our expressions.

“Is everything okay?”

Doc doesn't even hesitate or try to play it down as he immediately asks, “Do you know where Neith is?”

Mabel's frown tells us all we need to know as she replies, “No, I'm afraid I don't. I didn't even see her after she got back from her task.”

“So she isn't still in a Choosing trial then?” I ask, just to make sure.

Mabel shakes her head, “No, there are no more trials scheduled for today, and Neith has already done one for today anyway. There are never two for the same person on the same day. The toll on the person would be too great.”

“Shit,” Van curses.

Ransom interrupts the conversation, “Do you know where the Draconian team is?”

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Mabel's eyes narrow slightly with suspicion, but she doesn't question us. Instead, she just answers, "They all got back from a trial around the same time that you all did, and they are now in the dining room having some dinner."

"Thank you, Mabel," Ransom replies, with a smile.

"Is there something that I should know about?" Mabel asks, concern heavy in her voice.

"Not for the moment, but if you see Neith, could you tell her that we're looking for her and she can meet us back at our room?" Griff asks.

Mabel nods in agreement, although she looks like she wants to question us further, and we all turn around and start to walk to the main hall of the castle.

My gaze drifts to River, and it occurs to me that this entire time, he has been silent. When I study him closer, I realize that there's a reason for it. His kitsune is incredibly close to the surface, and now that I am focusing on him, it's easy to tell that his power level has increased, and he's trying to keep it under control.

"Are you okay?" I ask him, gaining the attention of the others.

"Well fuck," Doc says glancing at River in concern.

It's clear that something is very wrong because he's not fidgeting or bouncing around like he normally is, and his hands are clenched tightly.

“We just need to find her,” he says.

“Do we go and question the Draconian team now?” Reed asks, a hopeful glint in his eye.

Evander frowns. We all know what will happen if we go and question the Draconian team, there will be blood and lots of it. Whether that’s because they have Neith, or because one of them has said something fucking insulting and sets one of us off. I’m good with the bloodshed, we all are, and that’s part of the problem.

The other problem is that if Neith isn’t with them, then telling the Draconian team is giving them the chance to find her before we can, and that will put her in danger. Especially if Neith is right about her theory and Kylen is trying to kill her.

“What about asking Castle?” Ransom suggests.

“It can’t hurt. Castle should, in theory, know everything that goes on within its walls and should be able to lead us to her,” I reply thoughtfully. “Let’s get out of the main hallway, though. There must be a reason why Castle doesn’t let it be widely known that he’s sentient.”

“Good point,” Van agrees.

We head through a random door that leads off the main hallway, and I hope that we aren’t about to walk into someone’s private quarters. Thankfully, we just end up in what appears to be a very fancy sitting room.

“Castle, can you light up the stones to my left if you can hear me?” Van asks as soon as the door is shut behind us. The stones immediately light up.

“Thank fuck,” River mutters.

“Is Neith okay?” Evander asks.

I shake my head as I explain, “You’re going to have to ask a yes or no questions, or it won’t be able to answer.”

Van rolls his eyes, “For fuck sake, I know that. I’ve seen Neith talk to House and Castle loads now, and she always does that.” He clears his throat again and looks at the wall where Castle made it glow moments ago. “If Neith is safe, can you glow again, please?”

Castle’s stones glow, but not as brightly as before.

“What does that mean?” Griff asks.

“Maybe he’s not sure?” Ransom suggests.

“Yeah, maybe,” I reply. “Castle, does that mean that you aren’t sure, glow if it does?”

The stones glow really brightly again, and I smile, well, at least we’ve managed to clear that up.

“Is Neith in the Castle?” Van asks, taking over the conversation again and adding, “If she is, then glow.”

The stones stay dim, and we all share a look, our frowns becoming even more prominent.

“If she isn’t in the castle, then where is she?” River asks.



“I have no idea,” Evander replies.

We’re all silent for a moment as we try to think about where she could be. There aren’t very many places where she could be. We’re stuck in the castle while we’re at the Choosing, and it’s not like she could go and see Sully or anything like that. She could go into the town, but it’s really quite late, and I don’t think that anything is going to be open at this time. Of course, this is a different realm, so I have no idea whether the same rules apply here as they do in the Earth Realm, and the more I think about it, the less confident I am that it is the case. There are a lot of nocturnal supernaturals around, and it would actually make more sense if the town stayed open all the time.

“Could she be in the town?” Griff asks, following my train of thought.

Before anyone can answer, River suddenly perks up. “If she left the castle, I should be able to follow her scent.”

“After this long? We don’t know how long she’s been gone for, and there are lots of other scents here that you aren’t used to,” Evander says.

“He’s right, you’ve got the best nose out of most supernaturals, but trails go cold and there’s only so long that they’re followable,” Reed reminds him. He knows all of this, but his panic is currently leading him.

“Her scent trail could have been mixed up by all sorts of creatures, or supernaturals crossing over the top of it, and even dragging it in those littlespikes that you explained to me when scent gets stuck on other people’s clothes temporarily and they

take it with them for a short while before dies out,” I add.

“I know all of that.” River replies and then adds simply, “It’s Neith. I have to at least try. My magic is stronger than it has ever been, and there is a good chance that I may still be able to follow it.”

The guys and I share a look. It doesn’t matter if River’s magic is stronger, the short of it is that the scent trail will only last for a very short amount of time, and there is absolutely nothing that River can do to change that. But looking at the spark of hope in his eyes, I know that we have to let him try because it’s riding him hard, and he needs to do something before his grip on his kitsune breaks and all hell breaks loose.

“Alright, man, it’s worth a try,” Van nods, studying River closer and clearly coming to the same conclusion that I have.

Without saying another word, River turns on his heel and heads out of the room.

“Thank you, Castle,” I say before I follow the others. Neith has taught me the importance of making sure that you say thank you to sentient things.

Quickly catching up with the others, we move swiftly through the main lobby of the castle, and he heads straight for the giant doors that lead out into the gardens.

“Before you do anything,” Reed says quickly, “we need to check to see if the cameras are watching us. Remember that they can see us in the grounds of the castle.”

“I don’t care,” River replies.

“No, you may not,” Reed says firmly, “but Neith definitely will. So, you will wait for five seconds while we check if we’re currently being watched by hundreds of thousands of supernaturals.”

My eyebrows rise slightly, and I can't help but smirk.

Looking suitably chastised, River nods and runs a hand through his already messy hair, "Shit, you're right. Sorry, man."

Reed grins, "No problem."

Just like Reed told River, it only takes us a couple of moments to determine that we aren't being watched.

"We aren't being broadcast," Reed confirms.

As soon as the words are out of Reed's mouth, River drops all pretense. His eyes become his kitsunes, his teeth lengthen, and so do his claws, as he partially shifts. His magic builds around him, and I'm not the only one raising my eyebrows in shock at the rapid transformation and his power level. He lifts his nose to the air, and his eyes flash silver.

I have never seen his eyes do that before, and I am entirely unsure what to make of it.

"This way," he says, his voice more of a growl than anything else, as he takes off through the castle gardens at a run.

## Chapter Fourteen

### Raiden

We follow with ease, and Griff asks, sounding understandably surprised, "You've found a scent trail?"

River nods, "Yes, in a way. It feels different than a normal scent trail, but it is

definitely Neith. I would know her anywhere.”

I share another look with the others. It’s not just unlikely that he has found Neith’s scent trail and it’s still strong enough that we can follow it, it’s impossible.

The only reasonable explanation is that she didn’t leave as long ago as we were assuming. To be honest, it’s entirely possible that we just kept missing her, and that she left the castle only moments before we did, and that’s why the trail is fresh. The thing is, if that were the case, then Mabel would have seen her, or we would have at least caught a glimpse of her, and it still begs the question of why? Neith wouldn’t just go out for a stroll or into town without letting us know, not because we’re controlling and have to know where she is every second, but because it’s not safe here and she knows that as well as we do. She would also want to check on us after we did the trial.

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So why did she leave?

As we race after River, heading straight out of the gates of the castle and down the dirt track that leads into town and the surrounding area, something else occurs to me. River may not want to get his hopes up, but we are all almost one hundred percent certain that Neith is his mate, and because of that, there is a strong possibility that it's not a scent trail that River is following, but rather his mate bond to Neith. He said so himself that it wasn't like a normal scent trail.

We're nearly to the edge of the town, the lights getting brighter, when River suddenly stops.

"Is everything okay, man?" I ask.

River nods, but doesn't reply as he tilts his head to the side like he's listening to something that we can't hear. He then turns to look into the dense forest that runs alongside this road.

"She's in here," River explains, as he glances back at us, looking slightly unsure.

Doc nods, "Alright, man, after you. We'll follow."

River nods and then takes off at a run again through the trees. It's a good job that we have had lots of practice running through densely packed forests like this, because there is absolutely no pathway in sight, and River is moving through the trees and leaving barely any sign of his presence in his wake. The more I watch him, the more certain I am that he is following his mate bond to Neith, and possibly a scent trail

now that we are closer to her. My fingers are practically itching to get into my library and do some research into Kitsune mate bonds and just mate bonds in general.

We have actually spoken about the mate bond before, so I know how he feels about it, but we haven't spoken about it since Neith has been around. We haven't had the opportunity to talk about it, not without everyone else around, and I know that he's going to have a hard time with the conversation, that's if he even sticks around to listen to what I have to say.

It's because of those reasons, and because I know how much the mate bond means to him, that I want to do as much research as I possibly can into the subject. I want to be able to provide him with set-in-stone evidence, concrete proof that he can have a mate and that it is Neith.

That kind of evidence means that I need to dive far back into the archives and possibly need to look into accessing some more well-equipped libraries than the one that I have, because there isn't any recent documentation of a kitsune with nine tails, let alone one that has been mated to a supernatural that isn't another kitsune. I know that the bond is possible because I can see it forming between River and Neith, but I know that he isn't going to believe it until the evidence is laid out in front of him, and that includes proof that something similar has happened before.

I will find it for him though.

River's pace suddenly picks up, "She's bleeding."

Shit.

Immediately, I check the tether, and let out a small sigh of relief when it comes back, that she's still alive.

“She’s not in mortal danger,” I tell the others, trying to reassure them, but unable to hide the worry in my voice.

We all pick up our pace so that we’re now running even faster, and we weren’t going slow in the first place. Knowing that Neith is bleeding though allows us to tap into even more of our magic, and I find myself glad that we aren’t being filmed right now because Evander and Ransom definitely shouldn’t be able to keep up with the rest of us, and yet they are easily keeping pace.

Everyone would know that there is a lot more to us than there seems to be.

“She’s close,” River says, and suddenly increases his speed to the point where the rest of us can’t keep up.

Fucking hell he’s fast.

“How is he doing that?” Van yells, not expecting an answer, as we race to catch up with him.

Neith

Arms suddenly wrap around me.

Luckily for River, his scent reaches me moments before I start to kick his ass thinking that it’s someone else attacking me. I mean that really was fucking close and I could have seriously hurt him. I would scold him, but my body has gone like jelly, completely relaxing into him.

The effect that his presence has on me should scare me, but it’s River, and he brings a level of comfort and safety that means that I don’t have to be on guard anymore.

His nose is buried in my neck, and he inhales deeply, “Thank fuck.”

I don’t know what that means, but the relief in his voice is obvious.

“Are you okay?” I ask him as I hold onto him tightly.

His reaction has made me worry that something has happened while I’ve been on this task, and there’s yet another thing that’s going to turn things upside down and cause us problems.

His head pulls back from my neck. “You’re bleeding.”



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I frown and reply, “Well, yeah.”

Maybe he didn’t see me get sliced by that poacher, and that’s why he sounds surprised that I’m bleeding.

I don’t have time to question him though as the others all surround us and I’m gently tugged out of River’s arms and into Evander’s.

“Hey!” I greet the rest of them happily as they surround me in seconds and smother me in cuddles and kisses. “You guys didn’t have to come and meet me out here, although I’m really glad you did. I was getting so fucking bored. Did you like my dance?”

Apparently, because I’ve had to keep all my thoughts inside for a while, I now can’t stop talking, and I’m babbling instead. It’s a good job that I know that the guys don’t mind. They pull back at my onslaught of questions though and all look at me like they’re incredibly confused.

“What the hell are you talking about, Nene?” Van asks.

I frown and open my mouth to ask him what he’s talking about because obviously I’m talking about what they just watched on the Choosing, but River’s eyes suddenly flash to those of his kitsune as his eyes narrow on the wound in my side, and he growls.

“You’re bleeding,” his voice is harsh, as he repeats his earlier words, his kitsune that closer to the surface. “I smelt it before, but that’s a lot more.”

I frown, “Well yeah, I got stabbed by the poacher, you saw that.”

“No, we didn’t,” Reed says, looking at me with concern.

Doc moves forward, “We can deal with whatever is happening in a second. First, I need to heal you.”

I nod, “Yes, please. My arm is still hurting, although not as much as it should be.”

“Your arm?” Raiden asks and glances at the bandage wrapped around it. “What happened?”

“That was in my first trial, I got burned by one of the backwards knee walking creatures that I told you about before from Luesidious,” I explain.

The guy’s eyes widen.

“Right, I think there’s a lot to explain, but Doc is right, let him heal you first and then you can explain everything,” Evander suggests.

I nod in agreement, but quite frankly I’m confused as shit.

“Alright, I’m going to heal the slice first since that’s pretty straightforward,” he explains as I feel his magic flow through me.

Within seconds, the pain from the cut on my hip is completely gone, and I let out a sigh of relief.

“Thank you,” I say gratefully, pulling him closer so I can give him a thank you kiss.

His smile is stunning, when I pull back, but he quickly becomes serious again as he

says, “Let’s have a look at the burn, if you got it from some kind of supernatural then I need to check that there isn’t any sort of poison or something else that I need to be aware of before I heal you,” Doc says as he gently takes my hand.

I nod and smile, “Yeah. That sounds good to me. To be honest, considering how bad it was, I am concerned that it’s no longer hurting. Doesn’t that mean that there’s really bad damage or something?”

Doc frowns, “Yeah, it does. The good news is I can fix that, but I do need to do it quickly.” He begins to unwrap the bandage around my arm and asks, “When did you stop noticing that it was hurting?”

“Well, it was definitely hurting after the fight with the poachers, and I’ve been walking for about an hour, so maybe two hours ago maximum was when I last noticed that it hurt,” I explain.

“Alright, well, that’s good. It wasn’t that long ago that will make it easy for me to heal,” Doc says, as he pulls the last of the bandage off and his eyebrows hit his hairline, “Or not.”

I grimace, refusing to look at my arm in case it’s all blackened and charred, or burned down to the bone, or something equally disturbing. “It’s bad, isn’t it?”

The guys are all still crowded around us, and it’s Griff who replies to me, “It’s healed. That’s why you aren’t feeling any pain, it’s pretty much nearly completely healed.”

My eyebrows rise in shock as I look down at my arm, and sure enough, where the giant and very painful burn was only a few hours ago, there is now just a red mark that looks like mild sunburn.

“Huh,” I say, at a complete loss for what else to say, because of all the things that I was expecting when Doc took off the bandage, I definitely wasn’t expecting it to be healed.

“Your supernatural healing must be kicking in,” Ransom suggests with a smile.

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My eyes widen as I stare at him. I mouth the words, “We’re being filmed.”

His eyebrows draw down over his gorgeous eyes, which I temporarily get distracted by, and he mouths back, rather comically since he looks so confused, “No, we aren’t. We double checked when we left the castle to come and find you.”

“But this is a trial?” I ask. “Or did it stop being broadcast after I helped the unicorn?”

“The what?” Raiden exclaims, excitement and disbelief filling his eyes.

“Come here,” River says, as he reaches for me and pulls me into his arms. “I just need to hold you for a moment, we couldn’t find you, and my kitsune, alright, I did not handle that very well.”

Once again, I melt into his arms, as he turns me so my back is to his chest, and I can still see the others.

“Wait, what do you mean that you couldn’t find me? Didn’t you watch the trial?” I ask them.

They all shake their heads, looking just as confused as I feel.

“No, there wasn’t a trial,” Griff begins to explain. “When we couldn’t find you, we did the spell that brought up the screen to watch the trial, but it wouldn’t work. We checked everywhere and then finally found Mabel, who told us that there were no trials scheduled for the rest of the day and that since you had already done one, you wouldn’t be doing another one anyway.”

My frown deepens, “But I was definitely in a trial. I was rushing down the stairs from the fourth floor, after watching you guys in your trial.” My eyes widen as I remember, and I derail the conversation temporarily as I ask, “Are you guys all okay? That was fucking insane.” Glancing up at River over my shoulder I add, “You were fucking amazing going all alpha on those lava snake things, it was hot as fuck. Is it going to get you in trouble or something though? I suppose Ahren already knows and I can talk to him anyway, but it’s not really Ahren that you have to worry about, it’s his asshole beta that would cause problems if he noticed. Ransom you were fucking amazing too, making out that it was you that was controlling the creatures, that won’t cause you any problems will it?”

The guys just stare at me for a moment as they try to catch up, before Ransom replies, “No, it shouldn’t cause me any problems at all. There are ways to explain how I did it without giving away how strong I am. Even if they did think that I did it with no extra help from potions or spells, it wouldn’t cause me as many issues as it would cause River, but you already know that.”

River’s arms tighten around me, “Don’t worry about it too much. We will deal with it if it happens. We have other things that we need to be worrying about now.” He grins and raises his eyebrow slightly when I tilt my head back so I can see him, albeit upside down, “You were telling us why you thought you were on a trial?”

My eyes widen, “Oh shit yeah. Sorry, so,” I begin and then realize that they didn’t answer one of the questions, so I ask again, “Wait, are you guys all okay? All healed?”

Doc nods, “I healed those of them that needed it, and they’re all good.”

“Oh good,” I reply.

They all look at me expectantly until Van chuckles and says, “You were telling us

why you thought you were in trial.”

I roll my eyes, “Shit, sorry guys, I’m really tired and lots of stuff has happened and my brain is not braining the way that it’s supposed to.”

“I fucking love the way you phrase shit,” Ransom chuckles, making me smile.

“Why thank you,” I reply, blowing him a kiss just because I can, and because I adore the way that his eyes heat up when I do. “Right, where was I in my explanation? Oh, that’s it, yes. So I was on my way to find you guys, and make sure that you were all okay, and as I opened the doors leading from the fourth-floor stairs, I got pulled through a portal and ended up in the middle of these woods. There was no obvious clue as to what I was supposed to be doing out here, but thanks to the portal, I assumed that it was a trial.”

I go on to explain in as much detail as possible what happened, and the guy’s eyes get wider and wider the more I explain about what happened.

“So then the unicorn rested its head on mine, you know like Mael does, and I felt it’s magic wash over me and boom,” I hold up my bracelet covered arm for them all to see, “I had a new pretty tattoo, or whatever the fuck it is and then the pretty leather cuff appeared to cover it. The unicorn didn’t explain anything, obviously, and just disappeared, and then I used my gift to find the way back to the castle. Oh, and I made up a marching song with dance moves thrown in, so actually I am incredibly glad that it wasn’t a trial, and everyone witnessed it,” I finish explaining. The guy’s stare at me with amixture of shock and amusement which is pretty much standard now, so I add, “Do you want to see it?”

All of their smiles widen at my offer, but River spins me around in his arms and grins, looking excited as he bounces on his toes.

“Definitely. Show me the dance,” he replies, his eyes lit up with excitement.

Now it’s my turn to start bouncing as I ask, “Seriously?”

He nods, “Yeah, come on, beautiful, show me what you’ve got.”

My smile turns sultry, “Maybe later, first I’m going to teach you the marching dance and song.”

The guys all burst out laughing and I barely resist the urge to pat myself on the back for such a quick comeback. I never normally think that fast on my feet. It’s usually a couple of days later when the perfect comeback comes to me, and I end up cursing myself that I didn’t think of it sooner.

“Alright, so the song is to the tune of the left, right march thing, do you know it?” I ask even though I’m pretty sure the majority of people know it. He nods with a smile, so I continue, quickly running through the words with him, which make him, and the others laugh again, mostly due to the number of curse words I threw in because I was thoroughly fed up with walking and mad at the lack of a portal to take me back to the castle. Although the lack of a portal makes sense now that I know that it wasn’t a trial.

## Chapter Fifteen

Neith



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“Alright, got it,” River says after only a couple of runs through the words. It really isn’t that complicated.

“Great, so these are the movements that go along with it,” I explain, and then begin to show him.

It takes us a couple of run-throughs, but he soon picks it up, and then we’re both marching along and singing the song with fancy arm and head movements thrown in for good measure.

“How the hell did we get to this point?” Reed asks through his laughter.

None of the others can stop laughing long enough to actually answer him, though, and River and I are too busy dancing to reply.

After a while, we finally stop, and the guys calm down.

“That was brilliant,” Doc compliments with a giant smile.

“We should probably get back to the castle, it’s really late, and we most likely have a trial tomorrow,” Ransom suggests.

“Hang on, I want to see Neith’s new tattoo?” Raiden says, looking at me questioningly.

I nod and pull at the leather cuff. I have to admit that I’m pleased that it comes off; it had crossed my mind that it may be a literal permanent feature that I couldn’t remove

even if I wanted to.

“Oh, it’s so pretty,” I say when it’s revealed, and then, because the guys are all looking at me confused, I add, “I only got to see it for a moment before it was covered by the bracelet.”

“That really is pretty. I’ve never seen anything like it,” Doc says.

“Raiden, do you have any idea what it means?” Evander asks, moving his eyes away from the mark on my arm.

Raiden shrugs, “Honestly, I am absolutely clueless about what it could mean. I knew that unicorns were once real, but I had no idea that they still existed, and honestly, it’s probably one of the few supernatural creatures that I haven’t looked into at all.”

“Oh,” I say, sounding quite disappointed. “I was really hoping that one of you knew something about it.”

“Sorry, Neith,” Raiden replies. “We can look into it when we get back to the house. Maybe we could ask Sully, he’s been around for a long time, and he might know something about them, and what the mark means.”

I nod, “Yeah, that’s a great idea, actually.”

“Do you feel strange?” Reed asks.

I pause and then shrug, “No more stranger than I normally feel.”

Reed smirks and adds, “I’m only asking because it was done with magic by an unknown supernatural creature and we have no real way of knowing whether it meant you harm or not.”

“He makes a good point,” Griff says with a troubled frown.

I shake my head, “There’s no way that it’s harmful.”

“You sound really sure about that?” Ransom questions.

I nod, “I am. The voices didn’t and haven’t reacted in warning at all, and in fact seemed quite pleased about it.”

“That’s definitely good news,” River says thoughtfully.

“The little bit of magic that I do have access to didn’t seem to react in any way either, and it has reacted to things when I’m under threat, so I think if the unicorn meant me harm, then my magic would have done something to protect me,” I explain.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Griff replies. “Your magic will always protect you, if you are in danger, unless it’s been suppressed or something, and even then it’s more likely to try to protect you than not.”

“Could it have been suppressed?” I ask, a thread of worry weaving through my resolve that the unicorn didn’t mean any harm to me.

Evander immediately starts shaking his head, and that thread of unease disappears, “No, you would know immediately if it had been suppressed, it’s not a very pleasant feeling. Even though you haven’t got access to all of your magic, you would still feel it.”

“Well thank fuck for that, I was questioning my instincts then,” I reply. “Wait, how did you guys find me if you weren’t watching the trial?”

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“Well, Raiden used the link to the tether,” Doc starts to explain.

Raiden winces, “Sorry about that. I just wanted to make sure that you were alive. We had no idea where the Draconian team was, and since we are now thinking that Kylen is trying to kill you, we were worried that they might have you and that Coen couldn’t do anything about it.”

I wrap my arms around his waist to stop his rambling, “Thank you for caring so much about me. I am eternally grateful for the tether, and I like feeling the piece of your magic inside me.” I burst out laughing, “Okay, I was trying to sound all sincere, but that just sounded dirty.”

His chest vibrates underneath my head as his laughter rumbles free, and the others all join in, laughing at my unintentional dirty joke.

Raiden’s hand reaches down, and he tilts my face up before he smiles and kisses me gently.

When he pulls up, he says, “Thank you.”

“So, Raiden checked and found out you were alive at least, but we couldn’t really tell anything else,” Evander starts, carrying on the explanation, “and we still couldn’t find you anywhere, that’s when we ran into Mabel, we even asked Castle, and it couldn’t tell us anything.”

“Then River went all alpha, and here we are,” Griff finishes with a grin.

I grin at River, “Thank you. I was getting really bored of walking by myself.”

“Even with your marching song?” he asks with a smirk.

I nod, “Yep, even with the song.”

“Let’s start walking back,” Evander suggests.

Doc sighs, “I wish I could just transport us back, but I can’t do it without the van.” He frowns, “Well, I might be able to now, but I don’t want to try that here, and it’s also not something that anyone should know that I can do.”

I nod, “Yeah, don’t do that, I think we’ve exposed enough of all of your extra talents, let’s not add to it.”

“Agreed,” River says firmly.

We all start walking, River holding one of my hands, and Griff holding the other one. I feel absolutely tiny walking between them, and I love it.

After a few moments, Raiden interrupts the silence, “It wasn’t a trial for the Choosing, we know that because Mabel said that two tasks for the same person don’t happen on the same day. We also couldn’t do the activation spell to watch you, so no one saw the task.”

“I’m really pleased about that, I don’t think that it would be a good idea for the supernatural population to know that the unicorns are in this area, or even that they definitely do exist, as I think that many supes think like us and thought that they were all gone. Their blood and horns are worth millions on the Obsidian Market, but I just thought that it was fake stuff. I had no idea that it was real,” I reply.

“Oh, absolutely. There would have been a lot of people out here looking for the unicorns, and they wouldn’t have been safe,” Griff agrees, squeezing my hand.

“It also means that no one saw your interaction with the unicorn and the mark that it left on you, that’s a really good thing. Especially since the unicorn provided you with the leather cuff so it clearly wants you to keep the mark hidden,” Ransom adds.

“Which means that the mark is obviously important,” Reed adds with a slight frown.

“The problem is that we have no idea why,” Van says.

“None of it explains why I was pulled here using a portal either,” I add. “The unicorn looked as surprised to see me as I was to see it, so it can’t have somehow called me to it so that I could help it.”

The guys are all silent for a moment as they try to think over what it could all mean.

“It’s strange, and is yet another thing that we can’t really look into until we’re back home and have no cameras on us or curious and dangerous people that we need to worry about,” Doc points out.

“I’m pretty much done with this whole Choosing thing now,” Reed mutters, running his hand through his hair, before adding, “not that I was exactly interested in it when we first arrived.”

“How many days have we got left now?” Griff asks. “The days have sort of morphed into one, and I have no idea where we are in the week.”

“It’s Wednesday so we have two more days of trials, then a rest day and then the scroll room thing where we find out what team you’re going to be on, and the perks if you win and all that,” Doc explains, and then adds, “I’ve been counting down the

days until we can get out of here.”

“That’s smart,” Van tells him.

We carry on walking, and my thoughts turn to the decision that the scroll is going to tell us. Whose team I’m going to be on. I am no longer worried that I won’t be put on the guys. I pause my thoughts. Okay, so maybe I am a little bit worried that I’m going to be put on the Draconian team, but that worry is nowhere as big as it was when we first arrived. Kylen isn’t even trying to win the game or even play it properly, from what I can see.

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His end game is a complete mystery to me. If he really does want me dead, which it's looking pretty likely that he does, then surely it would have been easier just to try and kill me off at the academy or on a job? Hell, it would have been easier to kill me anywhere else but here, at the Choosing. His motivation isn't really clear either.

Before I saw him at the academy, I had never met him before, I am one hundred percent sure of that. He had it out for me from the second that he saw me, and it would be impossible to make someone want to kill you that quickly, even for me. Surely he can't hate the guys that much. The dislike that he seems to have for them is pretty extreme in itself, but it's clear from the treatment of Coen that his hate is extreme.

The anger that floods me at the thought of Coen being controlled by Kylen is extreme, and I feel my magic stir in anger too. The feeling is such a surprise that it distracts me enough that my anger dies. Smiling, I can't help but be pleased that my magic is as angry as I am about the situation because hopefully that means that if, no fuck that, when the opportunity presents itself and I can get that stupid necklace off Kylen's neck and figure out how to destroy it, hopefully my magic will help me do it.

I really hope it does because I'm not entirely sure that I'm going to be capable of getting hold of it without some sort of help. Not only am I not a supernatural, but dragons are notorious for how well they protect their treasure, otherwise known as their hoards, and I would be incredibly surprised if Kylen doesn't consider the necklace a part of his hoard.

A dragon's hoard isn't necessarily things like jewels or gold, although for some dragons that is true. A hoard can be anything, and is extremely personal to the



dragon, they protect them with deadly ferocity. I have met dragons whose hoards have been stamps, mugs, buckles, bottle tops, and my absolute favorite, books. Coen's hoard is weapons, all weapons, from all time periods and realms, and I was lucky enough that he showed me a small portion of it. It was a huge honor, especially since usually a dragon's hoard is only shared with their true mate, and their other half.

"How are we going to get the necklace off Kylen?" I ask suddenly, interrupting the conversation that the guys were having, which I'm pretty certain I was supposed to be a part of.

It takes them a moment to pick up where my train of thought has come from, but they soon easily switch up the conversation to match me.

"I don't know, if I'm being honest," Van replies with a frown.

"We've been so busy and focusing on the Choosing tasks that we haven't really thought about how we're going to get the necklace from Kylen, it was just sort of left as we're or rather you are, going to get the necklace from Kylen since you're likely to be near him more than we are," River replies, also with a frown, but this time I think it's more because of the idea of me having to be that close to Kylen, rather than the fact that we've still got to get the necklace.

I nod, "Yeah, it's just I'm not entirely sure how I'm going to get it. I don't even know if I've got another task with them or not."

"I think it's probably likely that you will. We've got two days of trials left, so it would stand to reason that one will be with us, and one will be with the Draconian team," Reed replies.

"I don't like the idea of you getting that close to Kylen," Ransom frowns. "We think

that he might be trying to kill you, and getting close enough to snag the necklace is going to give him the perfect opportunity to hurt you.”

I frown, “Yeah, that thought had crossed my mind. I don’t know how else we could get away with it, though.”

The guys are all silent for a moment, and I try to think of a way around it.

“The only thing that we could really do is to wait, and not get Coen out now,” Doc says, clearly not liking the idea.

“We could, but I don’t like it,” Raiden says. “He’s suffered enough, and I have a feeling that he’s suffered far more than we realize. I want him out as soon as possible.”

“We all do,” Doc agrees.

“But we also can’t put Neith at risk,” Raiden adds, pushing a branch out of the way with more force than strictly necessary.

An idea occurs to me.

It’s a risky one for sure, and its suggestion will give the guys more of an idea of what I am capable of, and the sorts of things that I have done, but it’s a good idea, and they’re going to find out eventually anyway.

“How much trouble am I going to get in if I murder him?” I ask casually.

The guys all start chuckling, apart from River, whose gaze is intensely studying my features.

“You’re serious,” River says, as a statement and not a question.

His words have the guy’s laughter dying, and they stop in their tracks as they turn to look at me.

Doc raises his eyebrow curiously, while River tries to hide his smirk. Of course, River was the one who recognized that I was being serious; he is the one who does the torture when it’s needed. Like tends to recognize like, and my darker side would probably surprise them, especially since they probably think that they have already seen my darker side.

“Are you serious?” Griff asks, more curious than repulsed by the idea, which is kind of reassuring.

I shrug, “Well, the only reason why I’m not one hundred percent certain that I can get the necklace off Kylan is because I need to keep him alive. If I can kill him, then I can have the necklace in my hands in maybe five minutes max.”

The guy’s eyes widen, River’s, Raiden’s, and Griff’s eyes all fill with heat, making me smile and my own curiosity rise.

Interesting.

“Just let me double check that I am understanding you properly,” Reed starts, his eyes beginning to heat with desire as well. “You aren’t worried because you may die, or because you can’t do it, but more because you can do it, but keeping him alive while you do get the necklace is going to be difficult.”

I nod, my smile sharp, “Pretty much.”

“Exactly what did you do for HID?” Van asks.

Ransom grins, “Van has a point, we know that you worked for them, and it was the jobs that no one else wanted to do. We assumed that they were dangerous, but what exactly were you doing?”

“Things that meant that I didn’t have to worry about keeping people alive,” I reply, somewhat bluntly. “I was brought in when no one else could get the job done because the person was either incredibly well protected, or too dangerous for anyone else to want to go near. To be fair, there was only one, maybe two jobs like that. The rest of the experience comes from the fact that the jobs were incredibly dangerous, so it was either them or me.”

I don’t tell them that I did die multiple times, not as many as I did when I was a prisoner of the sick fucker that Coen and Dimi saved me from, but I did die. Now is not the time to bring up that conversation, and there is a chance that someone may be listening. That conversation absolutely should not be overheard.

“They put you in deadly situations?” Griff practically growls. “I mean, we knew that, but there are dangerous situations, and then there are ones like the one that you’re describing, where you have no choice and it’s either their life or yours.”

I shrug, “It is what it is, and it’s partly thanks to my reputation with Dimitri, which is why they put me into those situations. You said that you guys knew about the raid at the fight ring, did you not hear anything about me?”

They all shake their heads.

“We didn’t really have many of the details of the actual case. We were brought in as backup,” Reed replies.

## Chapter Sixteen

Neith

“Actually, come to think of it, considering that you were so close to Dimitri, and such an integral part of his operation, I’m surprised that we didn’t know about you,” Raiden says with a frown, as he begins to walk again, and we all do too.

“At the beginning, Dimitri made sure to keep all of us out of the public eye. We couldn’t do what we did if everyone knew who we were. After he changed and he moved away from what we were, and everything that came after it, Kar and I still made sure to keep as out of the knowledge of others as possible, we were obviously known but not widely so,” I explain.

“Kar?” River asks curiously.

“Yeah, he really was like a brother to me. Fiercely protective, but would mess with me all the time, and didn’t treat me any differently just because I was a human. Coen, Dimi, and he used to have the most epic sparringmatches, they were literally explosive. He helped to keep an eye on me around the more dangerous supes if Coen and Dimitri weren’t around. When Dimitri changed, he also tried to distract him as much as possible so that I could avoid Dimitri’s poisonous and hurtful words and actions as much as he was able to. Obviously, he couldn’t do it all the time or even too often, since he had his own jobs to do,” I explain with a fond smile.

“Sounds like someone I’d like to meet,” Doc says with a smile.

“He’d like you guys,” I grin.

“Where is he now?” Ransom asks curiously.

“He’s still with Dimitri,” I reply with a frown. “He said that someone had to keep an eye on him. He also knew that there was no way that HID would protect him, and he had made too many enemies and done too much to go to SID and hope that they didn’t take him down. He had done no more than I did. He just wanted to stick around for Dimitri, even though Dimitri treated him just as badly as he treated me. I never really understood it.”

“Huh,” Doc replies, with a slight frown.

“When was the last time that you saw him?” Raiden asks, distracting me before I can ask Doc what he’s thinking.

My eyebrows draw down as I try to think of how long it’s been, “It must have been a good few years. I have seen him since I got out and started to work for HID, but it’s been a long time. Dimitri followed him the last time and let loose a torrent of verbal abuse that nearly broke me. Kar knocked him out, gave me a giant hug, threw Dimitri over his shoulder, and told me not to worry, he’d keep him away. I didn’t see him again.”

My frown deepens as I think back to that moment, looking at it from an outside point of view, now time has dulled the sting of his words and actions. I’m most likely remembering it wrong, and seeing things that I want to see, it was a long time ago, but looking back, I would almost be tempted to say that Dimitri let Kar knock him out. Kar is strong, but he and Dimitri fought all the time, there’s no way that he was able to surprise Dimitri enough to knock him out. Plus, Dimitri is stronger than Kar.

I shake my head. I’m not going down that rabbit hole, not again. I spent a long time

making excuses and trying to find reasons for Dimitri's behavior when there weren't any, and I can't allow myself to start doing that again, all it does is cause me pain.

"Well, if everything went to plan, then Dimitri is most likely in one of our prisons now, so you might be able to see Kar again," Griff points out, with a slight frown between his eyebrows.

"Why are you frowning?" Ransom asks.

Griff's frown becomes deeper, "I don't know. I just got an uneasy feeling, my magic stirred."

"A vision?" Raiden asks.

Griff shakes his head, "I didn't see anything, but I would definitely say that the feeling was a premonition. I just don't know exactly what it's about."

"Give it a day or two, and you'll probably get the full vision that will let you know what the feeling was about. That's how it usually works," River suggests.

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Griff nods in agreement, “Yeah, good point.”

“I just realized none of you answered me, and we got all off track with the conversation,” I say after a few moments of silence. “Can I kill him?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Evander replies. “As much as I want to be able to tell you to go for it, it will just end up causing you more problems.”

“Plus, we would probably have to go on the run and not to sound incredibly selfish, but I really like our house, and now that I’ve finally moved in I can get my room exactly like I want, I’ve never really had a room before, not one that I’ve wanted to make my own. Just in case I’ve had to leave it,” Doc rambles.

His ramble catches me off guard completely because I haven’t ever heard him ramble before, and it clearly catches him off guard as well because his eyes widen and then dart around looking everywhere but at me.

I reach for his hand and squeeze it tightly. “You’ve never really had a room before?”

He glances down at me, his expression cautious like he’s waiting to see some kind of judgment or something similar on my face, when he doesn’t find any, he doesn’t relax completely, his shoulders still tense and his eyes tight.

He glances up at the others, and I catch Evander nod once, and give him an encouraging smile.

He lets out a heavy breath and then replies, “No. I have never had a bedroom that was



really mine. From the age of twelve, I grew up in the supernatural equivalent of an orphanage. Any roommates that I have had since have gotten pretty fed up with me pretty quickly, and so I never made a space mine. I'm not easy to get along with."

I frown, "Why not? I don't find you difficult to get along with at all. I think you're amazing, and so incredibly intelligent. I love it when you talk about what you do and why you're doing what you're doing. It's really interesting."

Doc's eyes widen, and the others chuckle softly.

"I told you," Van says.

I've clearly missed something. "What?"

Doc stops, moves me so that I'm facing him, and pulls me tight against him, kissing me softly. He gently rubs his nose against mine and says, "Nothing. You are absolutely fucking perfect, how the fuck did we get so fucking lucky."

"Ain't that the truth brother," Ransom mutters while the others all nod in agreement.

Doc pulls my hand gently so that I carry on walking, and I sort of just follow in a daze. That was so fucking sweet. I definitely feel like I've missed something big, but I have no idea what, and no one seems to be upset, so I decide that I'm going to let it go.

"So no murder?" I question again, trying to change the subject, even though the conversation has been had, and I know the answer.

Evander chuckles and shakes his head. "No Nene, no murder. At least not for the moment."

“I’m good with that,” I reply. “I don’t want Doc to lose his bedroom. I really like my bedroom too actually. Oh, I’m so tired,” I finish as a giant yawn seems to overtake me from nowhere.

“It’s been a long day,” River points out with a smile.

“Tell me about it. I had the trial this morning, then the panic of watching you guys in a trial, and then what I thought was another one, but even if it wasn’t, it was like a trial and I met a fucking unicorn, that’s just nuts. Honestly, I think if I didn’t have the proof on my arm, I wouldn’t believe it happened and would think that I had fallen in the woods, landed on some hallucinogenic plants, put my fingers in my mouth somehow, and then tripped the whole thing.”

River bursts out laughing and teasingly asks, “Does that happen often?”

I raise my eyebrows, “You would be surprised how often that happens.”

River’s mouth drops open in shock as all of the others burst out laughing.

“No fucking way,” Griff chuckles.

“Oh, you have to tell us that story,” Reed adds.

I grin, “Maybe one day.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” River grins, “it sounds like one epic story.”

I chuckle. “Oh, it is, but I think I probably need to be drunk and have Coen with me in order to give it justice.”

“Even better,” Ransom laughs.

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“Back to the original question,” Griff says. “I think when it comes to getting the necklace from Kylen, the plan should be that you get it if the opportunity arises and it’s safe to do so. If it’s going to put you at extra risk, then don’t do it. Coen wouldn’t want you to risk yourself unnecessarily. If you can’t get it, we will figure something else out. We teach at the academy, and we can ask Ty to make sure that we’re around when they are.”

“No, we can’t,” River interrupts. “Ty said that their team would be disbanded, and they wouldn’t be working for SID when the Choosing is over.”

“That’s true, I forgot about that,” Griff replies with a frown.

“Do you think that they know that?” I ask curiously.

River shrugs, “I have no idea. We got pulled in a lot sooner than we thought we would, so Ty may not have had a chance to fill them in on the price of their actions and pulling a human into the Choosing.”

“That’s true. I’m not sure he would have told them anyway. They’re a danger, and if they have no job left to go back to, or it’s under threat at least, then they don’t really have much to lose, and they could have posed an even bigger threat to Neith,” Raiden points out.

“I’m not human though,” I say, replying to what River said. “Is that likely to cause a problem for Ty when he fires them, because technically they didn’t pull a human in?”

Van shakes his head, “I don’t think so, as far as they were concerned, they pulled you

in thinking you were a human.”

“Besides, that’s not the only reason why Ty is getting rid of them. They have many faults, and they shouldn’t be SID agents,” Ransom adds.

Doc nods in agreement, “I agree, but don’t forget that they’re all pretty well connected, so it may take a while for Ty to get rid of them in the first place, and those connections could use the fact that Neith isn’t actually human to their advantage and as a reason why Ty should keep them employed.”

“I don’t think that they’re as well connected as they like to make out that they are,” Ransom says with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, I know that Kylen isn’t well connected to Draith, at least I am reasonably sure that he’s not. I didn’t see him around when I was at the Keep, and I have been there a few times now,” I reply.

“Exactly,” Evander says. “I think that he may be using something to control the others as well, not to the same extent as the control he has over Coen, but definitely something. Fetrick is not a small supernatural, or a weak one for that matter, and yet he was terrified that he had said too much when we ran into him.”

“Fetrick?” I ask.

“The supe that we ran into when we were looking for Coen after your trial with them,” Ransom explains.

“Oh, right, yeah, I remember.” I frown as I continue, “I think you’re right about it not being the same as Coen. He doesn’t have any control whatsoever when Kylen gives him an order, he has no choice but to follow, he wouldn’t still be there if he did. Whereas I’ve seen the others question Kylen and walk away from him. So even

though he may be controlling them through fear, they have a lot more free will.”

“Yeah, I completely agree. I would even go as far as to say that it’s only a couple of them, maybe even just Fetrick, that are being controlled by fear, and that the others are there out of choice. Rupert certainly is,” Reed suggests.

“I think that’s a fair assessment,” Raiden agrees. “We aren’t really going to know what’s going on until Coen is free and can fill us in.”

“Is Kylen just going to let Coen go free?” River asks with a worried frown.

“He’s not going to have a choice,” I growl, but then concede. “I do see your point, though. Kylen has had Coen under his control for a long time. He most likely thinks that there is no way that Coen will ever be free of that control, which means Coen most likely knows a lot about the shit that Kylen has been doing, most likely things that Kylen doesn’t want anyone else to know about.”

“Exactly,” River agrees.

“Which means we need to be on guard when we do free him and make sure that it happens while we’re there,” Raiden starts and continues to explain, “which I know sounds odd, but I had an idea, if we can’t do it here then we could get a replica of the necklace made and switch them out so that Kylen doesn’t realize straight away and that it’s not his necklace, which would give us a chance to study the original one properly and work out how it’s controlling Coen and the safest way to break it.”

“You’re worried that there may be some failsafes built into the control which could harm Coen if we just break it,” Doc summarizes.

Raiden nods, “Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m worried about.”

My eyebrows draw down over my eyes, “Why does everything have to be more complicated than it needs to be? I was hoping I could grab it and smash it, but I don’t want to risk hurting Coen.”

“It may not be easy to break either,” Van points out. “There’s no way of knowing what it’s made of. We don’t even really know the design of it, which would help us do some research and find out what we’re dealing with.”

“So really it would be better if we could wait until after the Choosing to swap the necklaces out and then break the control over Coen safely,” Ransom says.

“We would need to tell Coen that was the plan. I’m pretty sure that he has orders in place that are long-term, but we’ve all seen Kylen give Coen new orders, so he will need to know that we’ve swapped the necklace out so that he can pretend to follow,” Griff says, as the castle finally comes back into view.

“Yeah, we would,” Evander agrees. “Okay, so the plan is pretty much still the same except instead of stealing the necklace, Neith, we need you to get as much detail as you possibly can about it so we can do some research,” Evander says.

I nod, “It might be easier to take a photo from a distance and then zoom in than it would be to rely on my memory.”

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“That’s a great idea, my phone died days ago though,” Raiden mutters. “Is anyone else still alive?”

Everyone shakes their heads, indicating that all of their phones are dead, and since there is no traditional electricity in the castle, and by that I mean the kind of electricity that we’re used to in the Earth Realm, there’s nowhere that we can charge them.

“So that’s something else that we’re going to have to wait to do until after the Choosing,” River growls, his expression dark.

I think it’s safe to say that none of us are happy about having to wait even longer to help Coen. We walk through the giant gates of the castle in silence. The night wrapping around us, and the chill in the air making me wrap my arms around myself to try and keep some of the warmth in. The frustration that we’re all feeling is obvious in all of our body language.

“I might have an idea,” I announce, as I pick up my pace and jog through the doors of the castle.

“You can’t kill him,” Ransom says from beside me, easily keeping pace.

I glance at him out of the corner of my eye and smirk. While his words were teasing and he is smiling and looking amused, there is a thread of seriousness in his tone too.

“Don’t worry, that’s not my plan. Not yet, at least,” I grin, making the guys chuckle.

“I love that you are being serious,” River grins, and I wink at him.

His dark side is pretty fucking intriguing especially since it’s such a contrast to his usually light and playful personality. It was a surprise that he handles the more violent methods of interrogation, although probably not as much as it should be if I really think about it. They’re all violent, they’re all capable of doing the same kinds of things that I am.

I like it more than I should.

“Care to share the plan?” Reed asks, keeping his voice low since it is really late and in theory everyone in the castle should be asleep.

“Oh yeah, so you know Ribit,” I ask.

“Who?” Ransom asks.

“A frog?” Raiden grins.

“No, the ghost. The maid that used to work here,” I frown with my explanation, “I told you about her.”

“You didn’t. I would definitely remember you talking about a ghost,” Griff replies.

“She was the one who confirmed who was in the painting,” I reply as we continue up the flights of stairs to take us to the fourth floor.

I don’t know why, but I’m just assuming that is where she’s going to be, probably because that’s where I have found her the last few times.

“I thought the voices said who they were?” Van asks me curiously.



I shake my head, “No, they confirmed who they were to me, but Ribit is the one who told me that they were the king and queen of Trieneliea.”

“To be fair, I’m not surprised that Ribit wasn’t mentioned. We were all sort of focused on what they were to you,” Doc replies carefully, just in case we’re being listened to, and we don’t know it.

## Chapter Seventeen

Neith

I absolutely do not think that it would be a good idea to allow anyone other than my most trusted people to know who my parents are. They’re royalty so they have enemies, and besides that we have no idea how far the Blue Fuckers reach goes and who he has working for him. He must have people working for him because how else could he have started the war? I have no idea how he is even in this realm since the whole point of closing the gates was so that the war, and more importantly, he, couldn’t get into the other realms.

My parents sacrificed themselves in order to keep the rest of the realms safe.

Although, having said that, I have absolutely no idea how Pete is here, he shouldn’t be, he should be in Trieneliea with my mother. The whole situation is confusing.

“Neith?” Raiden asks.

“Sorry, what?” I reply.

“We were wondering what your idea was and what it has to do with the ghost,” Raiden reminds me.

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“The ghost has a name,” Ribit retorts with a smirk, appearing in the middle of the hallway on the third floor.

The guys jump.

“Where the fuck did you come from?” Doc exclaims.

Ribit’s eyes widen, “Wait, you can see me?”

“Of course we can,” Griff replies, looking confused.

I chuckle, “We were just coming to see you.”

“Wait, this is Ribit?” Ransom asks. “She doesn’t look like a ghost.”

Before I can explain what Ribit told me about how she can’t communicate with many people or even be seen. One of the workers that we saw on the first day that we arrived comes around the corner. She greets us all by our names and smiles, but doesn’t mention Ribit.

“What did you do to piss her off?” River asks. “She didn’t even look at you.”

Ribit chuckles, “Bold of you to assume that I pissed her off.”

River’s eyes widen slightly, “Shit, sorry sometimes my mouth says things without consulting my brain.”

Ribit smiles, “Don’t worry about it, she didn’t say hello because she can’t see or hear me.”

“What?” Raiden asks. “I know you’re dead, but you’re pretty powerful if we can see you, you don’t look even remotely ghost-like.”

“That’s all you guys. Honestly, I thought it was just Neith, but since you’re all hers, I did wonder if the gift would transfer onto you guys as well,” Ribit says. She looks at Raiden, her expression becoming serious, “I know you’re a reaper, and I know that you are going to want to cross me over, but please don’t use any of your reaper magic on me and try to make me go, it won’t end well.”

Raiden’s eyebrows rise, “I have no idea what kind of reapers you have dealt with in the past, although I can imagine, but I would never force someone to move on unless they were a danger or their soul had deteriorated to the point that they were at risk of becoming a Wraith. You’re neither of those things.”

Ribit looks surprised, “Yeah, you’re definitely a lot different than any reaper I have spoken to in the past, they make it their mission to try to cross me over.”

“It’s always a choice,” Raiden replies with a shrug.

Ribit looks at me and smirks, “I get it.”

“Get what?” I ask, and then immediately regret the question when a mischievous glint alights in her eyes.

“Why you’ve made them yours,” she replies.

“Made us yours, huh?” Doc grins, his eyes flashing gold, while the others just smile and look at me expectantly.

I shoot Ribit a look, “I never said that. Anyway, it’s getting late, and we need to get on with my plan.”

Ribit’s eyes light up, “Oh, a plan, is that why you were coming to see me?”

I grin, “Yep. We should probably go and speak somewhere that we definitely can’t be overheard.”

“Back up to the fourth floor we go then,” Ribit says as she disappears from view.

“That’s so cool,” River mutters as he rushes ahead to the end of the corridor and up the stairs.

We all follow him quickly, and I have to admit that I’m slightly more cautious as I head through the door, but only because I really can’t cope with another trial right now. To be honest, we should be heading to bed, it’s late and we have a trial tomorrow, or at least I definitely do and after the two trials I have done today, I absolutely need to go to bed, but this is important, and it may be the best way that we can help Coen without wasting any more time. The longer that we wait to help him, the more we risk that Kylen realizes that we know each other and he disappears with Coen so that we can’t help him.

When we get up to the next floor, Ribit leads us into the room where she and I watched the guys' trial earlier, and then everyone turns to look at me expectantly.

“What’s the idea then?” Reed asks curiously.

I look at Ribit, “I was wondering if you would help us?”

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She frowns slightly but nods, “If I can help, then of course I will. What is it that you need help with?”

I pause, checking in with my instincts and the voices, and neither of them gives any indication that my idea is a bad one, so I explain to Ribit all about Coen and what’s going on. The guys look at me, clearly surprised that I’m giving so much away, but none of them stop me, and they all chip in here and there adding their own parts to the explanation.

By the time that I’m done with the explanation of what is happening to Coen Ribit looks murderously furious.

“I’ll kill him for you,” she says with absolutely no hesitation.

I grin, “As much as I would love to say go for it, I can’t. We don’t know enough about what is controlling Coen to make sure that we won’t hurt him if we just kill Kylen. That was my way to solve it.”

Ribit grins, “I knew I liked you.” She takes a deep, calming breath, and the rage in her eyes dims a bit. “Alright, what do you need me to do?”

“You’ll help?” Reed asks.

She nods, “Of course I will. Not only do I consider Neith a friend, but well, let’s just say that someone being forced to do things against their will is a touchy subject for me.”

Her expression is filled with rage and pain, and I know that this is a subject that she doesn't want to talk about, so I don't question her. I simply nod.

"Thank you," I reply. "Kylan wears a necklace around his neck. I am ninety-nine percent sure that it is what is allowing him to control Coen. The trouble is, we need to know what we're dealing with before we can break the spell, or whatever it is that's controlling Coen," I go on to explain about our plan to make a duplicate. "So do you think that you can get close enough to him that you could get a really good look at the necklace, and describe it to us well enough that we can do some research on it?"

Ribit immediately nods, "Absolutely, I can do that. I've been around for a long time, I might even recognize it and be able to help."

"That would be amazing if you did," Reed replies. "But even if not, just a really good description of what it looks like would be helpful enough."

"I'll see what I can do," Ribit replies. "Wait here, it shouldn't take me too long."

"Wait, do you know who we're talking about?" Raiden asks.

Ribit nods, "Oh yeah, the cunt that leads the other team. He's a real fucking piece of work, Castle really fucking hates him, and so do the people that work here."

"I'm not surprised at all," Evander agrees.

"We have never had a member of a team come to the Choosing and behave like he does. It's like he doesn't want to win, and he's not taking it seriously at all. There are serious consequences if the Choosing isn't respected and he is teetering on the edge," Ribit replies.

"There are?" I question, with a confused frown. "I can't remember anything about

that.”

“That’s because it’s been thousands of years since the Choosing has had to dish out those consequences,” Ribit replies. She looks at me, “You have a trial tomorrow, you guys all need to get your sleep. Give me ten minutes and I will be right back with your information.”

“Thank you,” I reply.

Within moments, she has disappeared.

“She’s certainly unique,” Doc says with a smile.

I nod, “Yeah, she’s awesome.”

“Do you know what her story is?” Raiden asks. “She’s incredibly strong for a ghost that has been around for so long.”

“Remember, only we can actually see and talk to her,” I reply. “She manages to interact okay with the other people here, and everyone knows that she’s here, but it’s not like she can communicate with us.”

“I forgot about that,” Griff replies. “How is it that we can see and speak to her as if she is alive, well almost, we can’t touch her.”

“I can. I shook her hand the first time we met, and then I held it while watching you guys in the trial,” I explain.

“What?” Ransom says, his eyebrows hitting his hairline and showing his surprise.

I nod, “Yeah, I didn’t actually realize that she was dead and a ghost until I was

talking to Mabel and asking her to apologize to Ribit because I was super weird the first time we met.”

“When are you not?” Van teases.



“Rude,” I retort with a smirk.

“You shouldn’t be able to touch her,” Raiden says. “I can make physical contact with the dead, but only when I’m in my shifted reaper form.”

“So you couldn’t just shake her hand right now?” I ask and then add unnecessarily, “If she were here.”

Raiden shakes his head, “Nope. I don’t know of a supernatural that can interact with the dead like they’re alive on this plane.”

“But it kind of makes sense,” Ransom starts. “Neith isn’t just any kind of supernatural, is she?”

“He’s got a point,” Doc adds. “She’s a supernatural that is thought to be extinct, and we can’t do any research on it yet, so we don’t know what is normal for her.”

Raiden nods, but looks slightly frustrated, “Yeah, you’re right. I’m not going to lie, it’s driving me nuts that I can’t research anything right now.”

“I know,” River says with understanding. “Hopefully it won’t be much longer though and we can get back to it.”

“Since we’re just waiting for Ribit to get back, how did your trial go?” Griff asks curiously after a couple of moments.

“Yeah, it was good actually. A lot more physical than the others, and only physical,

which I'm incredibly glad for, especially after yesterday's challenge," I reply.

I can't help but frown when I say yesterday, so much is happening in the days at the moment that it feels like more time should have passed. To be honest, it feels like it should have been days since this morning's trial, not just a few hours.

"Were you in Luesidious? You said that one of the same creatures that you encountered there gave you the burn," Doc asks.

I shake my head, "No, it wasn't that realm. I don't know where I was, but it felt different."

"What was the trial?" Ransom asks curiously.

"There was a pack of them, and I had to kill them all," I explain. "I had help, though."

"From who?" Van asks, surprised.

"I think it was definitely more of a what than a who," I reply with a smile.

"You think?" River asks, raising an eyebrow.

I pull a face, "Yeah, so this is going to sound absolutely crazy, but whatever helped me was invisible. So I have no idea what it was, it was big and deadly, it killed several of the backward knee things, and I have no idea what its motivation was for helping me."

"Well, that's interesting," Raiden says, his eyebrow raising along with his curiosity.

"Yep. I thanked it, and was going to see if I could find out more about it, but I got

pulled back here before I could. I figure it was probably a creature of the realm that decided to help,” I explain, with a shrug.

That is not what I meant to say, I meant to tell them that the creature was the same one that bit me, and that the necklace that Flinotive and the imps gave me reacted weird before he showed up, but none of that comes out of my mouth and the harder I try the more the thoughts slip from my mind until I have no idea what I was thinking about.

Huh, I’m sure it wasn’t that important anyway.

Van nods, “Most likely. There are no rules against outsiders helping us, they just don’t tend to.”

“Yeah, they always seem to want to attack or eat us,” River says with a wide grin.

“Why are you smiling about that?” Griff asks with an eyebrow raised in amusement.

River’s smile widens. “Because it’s fun.”

Griff shakes his head, but his smile grows. “True, although it’s exhausting trying to hold back so that we don’t give away too much.”

“Agreed,” Ransom says.

“Hey, at least you guys have something to hold back,” I smirk.

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Reed's eyes light with a mischievousness as he says, "Well, yeah, there is that."

Sticking my middle finger up at him as I laugh I change the subject, "How long has it been since Ribit left? She's going to be okay, right? He can't do anything to her?"

Raiden's eyebrows dip over his eyes, "While there are some supernaturals that can affect the dead, Kylen isn't one of them, so unless he has some sort of spell on him and activates it at the right time, Ribit should be absolutely fine."

"I know that was supposed to reassure me, but Kylen is already doing things that he shouldn't be able to do, Coen is proof of that, and it really wouldn't surprise me if Kylen has something that meant that he could feel the dead if they're around him, and something that means that he can do something about it if he did feel them," I reply with a frown.

Raiden nods, "I get that, but I would be able to feel it if he had something like that on him. I can always feel death," he stops mid sentence and his eyes widen. He shakes his head, "Damn it, that's what I was feeling on the stairs, it was Ribit. I was so distracted by finding you, and I'm clearly tired, because it didn't even register that that was what I was feeling."

Reed claps him on the shoulder and squeezes once, "Don't worry about it, we're all really tired and running on empty by this point. It's been full on, emotionally and physically for a while now."

Suddenly the door to the room glows red, in what I can only assume is a warning from the castle. Rushing to the door, I don't even think twice as I pull them open, a

shadow disappears down the stairs and I rush after it the guys hot on my heels. It takes me only seconds to get to the top of the stairway, but there is nothing to be seen and the doors at the bottom are still shut tightly.

“What the fuck was that about?” Doc asks.

“I think the castle was warning us about something,” Raiden suggests, sounding slightly unsure.

“Did you see something, Nene?” Van asks.

I nod, and turn back around, heading toward the room, “Yeah, I thought I did anyway. It was a shadow of some kind. It was moving really quickly, and by the time I got to the top of the stairs it wasn’t there anymore.”

“I saw it as well,” Reed says with a frown.

“What or who was it?” Ransom questions.

Once we’re back in the room, I look toward the fireplace, from experience with House it’s easy for enchanted houses and in this case castles to speak through fire, so that’s where I direct my question.

“Castle, can you light up the fire if there was someone listening at the door?” I ask and flames instantly flare to life in the fireplace.

“Well, that was a pretty definitive answer,” Griff says with a frown.

“That’s really not good,” Doc says, his eyebrows pulling down with worry. “What were we talking about? Was it anything that shouldn’t have been overheard?”

## Chapter Eighteen

Neith

Ifrown, “I don’t think so. Not at that point anyway, but I guess it depends on how long they were listening for.”

“Castle, can you make the flames flare if they were listening for longer than five minutes?” Reed asks.

We all wait and watch the fire intently, but nothing happens, and the flames stay flickering gently in the grate.

“Okay, so I’m guessing that as soon as whoever was listening stepped outside the door, the castle let us know that they were there,” Ransom says. “Which means they didn’t really hear anything of any importance, just us talking, and that we’re all together this late, but I don’t think that will be a problem. There’s no rule saying that we can’t spend time with you.”

“Why do I feel like a teenager again getting caught in the girls’ dorms,” River chuckles.

“Get caught in the girls’ dorms a lot, did you?” I smirk, trying not to laugh.

River’s grin widens, but he refuses to answer, and I burst out laughing.

“Castle, was it someone from the other team listening in?” Reed asks and then adds when he realizes he forgot to make it a yes or no question, “Can you flare the fire if it was?”

The fire stays dim, and I frown.

“Okay, well, that wasn’t what I was expecting. Who the hell is listening in on us, and are they a threat?” Raiden asks.

“If it’s not the Draconian team, then I doubt that whoever it was is a threat to us, they were more likely just curious. Judging from the dust and things up here, not many people come here. It could have just been someone who works here who was curious about the noise up here,” River suggests.

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“I would agree,” I start, “but whatever I chased definitely didn’t look like a person. It was just a shadow. At least that’s what I thought it was.”

The guys are all silent and frowning for a moment before Evander says, “There are some creatures that can shift into shadows, but they are rare.”

“There are also spells and potions that can allow the caster to disappear in shadows or look like they are,” Ransom adds. “So it is possible that it was someone who was listening in. If they were cloaking themselves though that would suggest that they were up to no good.”

“I don’t think there’s a way that we’re going to figure out who it was and what their motivation was in listening in,” Griff replies.

“Castle, can you let us know if the person who was listening is ever nearby while we’re still here?” I ask.

The fire flares.

“I’m going to guess that was a yes,” Reed smiles. “That’s probably as good as we’re going to get at figuring out who was out there.”

“To be honest, we have enough to worry about at the moment anyway. It’s not like whoever it was heard something that they shouldn’t have, and it wasn’t a member of the Draconian team, so I think we just leave it at that,” Evander suggests.

“Agreed,” Doc replies.



Coen

All I want to do is be with Neith and the guys. I want to know how the guy's trial went today, and if Neith had one. I want to check on her, but Kylen seems to be watching me even closer than he usually is, and I can't risk it. All of the other team members are off doing their own thing in their rooms or asleep since it's pretty late. I very rarely sleep. Unsurprisingly, I get vivid and terrifying nightmares, and I wake up extremely violently because of them. I actually take a special herbal tea that was mixed specifically for me, but we got pulled in with no notice, and I don't have it. Which means I have been sleeping very sporadically, if at all.

It's not exactly great to be doing something so challenging as the Choosing on barely any sleep, but I don't have a choice, and I'm pretty used to working with practically no sleep. Kylen only lets me have the herbs when he deems it necessary.

In the long nights here when I should be sleeping, I have actually been trying to get back in contact with Dimitri. I want to see if I can help him and get as much information as possible about how it happened. If he knows who's controlling him and how, then I'm hoping that I will be able to figure out a way to help him.

Plus, I'm probably the only person who understands what he's going through, except I haven't been made to make Neith hate me yet.

My heart clenches, I know how much Dimitri loves Neith, and I've witnessed some of the shit that he's said to her. He fell off the fucking sane train only a short amount of time before I did, so I wasn't around for a lot of it, but I saw enough. Knowing, what I do now, I can only imagine how much that fucking killed him.

Somehow I have been left in the shared area of our room with fucking Kylen, I have no desire to spend any more time with him than I really have to.

As I start to get up though, a woman suddenly walks straight through the damn door. I have seen a lot in my lifetime, but I can honestly say that I have never seen that before. It's thanks to my shock that I don't really react, and I take in her uniform and the fact that she is dressed like the others who work here, which means I don't immediately attack. Just because she works here doesn't mean that she should just walk straight through the doors, especially not this late at night. None of the other staff have, and actually, now that I think about it, other than at mealtimes, I don't really see them.

That's probably due to Kylen's winning personality, he doesn't actually treat them with respect or even common courtesy.

He's dick to them, but he is to everyone. No one would be surprised if they were avoiding us because of him. Opening my mouth, I quickly stop myself from saying anything as her eyes land on me and widen.

"Can you see me?" she asks and then quickly adds. "Don't reply out loud."

I incline my head slightly to the side, hoping that Kylen isn't paying enough attention to me to question what I'm doing.

"Coen?" she asks.

I frown, how the fuck does this woman know who I am? I definitely haven't ever seen her before, but nothing is screaming danger at me. I decide what the hell, and again incline my head to say yes.

"I'm Ribit, a ghost, and friend of Neith's. She's sent me here to get a good look at the necklace," Ribit says. "She's filled me in."

Her eyes light with a rage that tells me all I need to know about her. If she hasn't

been in a situation similar to the one that I'm currently in, I will be incredibly surprised. Her reaction is so powerful that her hair lifts in a breeze that can only be felt by her, and the temperature of the room drops enough that even Kylen takes notice, but only enough to frown and shoot more flames at the already lit fire.

I am surprised that I can see her, and he can't. I would assume that it was something that she was doing, but she seemed as surprised as I was that I could see her, so I don't think so. She was sent by Neith though, and honestly, that's all I need to trust her.

She smiles, "He shouldn't realize that I'm here, although his instincts might ping at some point because I'm going to need to get pretty close to him. If that happens and you can distract him, that would be great."

I nod again, I really want to ask her if there is anything else I can do to help, but I don't want to risk alerting Kylen to her presence and then cause her to miss out on the opportunity for her to get a good look at the necklace, and mess up whatever plans Neith and the guys have to break the control. With this in mind, I stay where I am, picking up the book that I was putting down and pretending to read while I watch what Ribit is doing. She smiles and then approaches Kylen.

She gets so fucking close to him as she studies the necklace that is normally hidden, but is only visible now because we're in private quarters and he likes to walk around with a shirt off. It works out in our favor, and is probably the only time that I have been grateful that he seems not to like shirts.

Kylen doesn't even bat an eye, it would seem that no instincts whatsoever are warning him that there is a threat in his space, and make no mistake about it, Ribit may not be a threat to me, but she is very definitely a threat to Kylen. After watching for a few moments, it becomes clear to me that because of the way that Kylen is sitting, Ribit can't see the whole thing.

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So I get up and stretch, and then walk behind the couch. Kylen doesn't like people behind him, and he predictably tilts his head up. Once I've got his attention, I walk around the room, seemingly pointlessly. I can feel his gaze stay glued to me, and it means that Ribit can get a really good look at the necklace from all angles as his head moves to follow me.

The whole time that I'm moving around the room my eyes drift back to Ribit every now and then, although since she is obviously near Kylen, I'm trying not to make it obvious that I'm looking at him or even in his direction which since he's looking at me, is quite difficult and requires a lot of side eye. His gaze moves away from me, and my own eyes widen as I see Ribit reach for the necklace around his throat, a determined look in her eyes.

I want to warn her. I have no idea what will happen if she touches it, but I do know that if it were as simple as just removing the necklace, then I would have done it years ago or somehow got someone else to do it for me, since one of the first long standing commands that Kylen gave me was that I couldn't touch the necklace. It simply can't be that easy to remove though, Kylen would be an absolute moron to leave something so powerful unprotected.

Of course, I can't tell Ribit that because that would announce her presence to Kylen, and that definitely wouldn't be a good idea. Plus, Ribit is already dead, so it's not like it can kill her twice. I still frown though. I really don't like the idea, and although she can't die again, she could get hurt, and I really don't want that to happen.

There is fuck all that I can do about it though, as her hand gets within centimeters of it, but before she can make contact with it, she gets thrown backward across the

room.

Shit.

I want to run over to her to make sure she's okay, but I don't want to give her away. That would be even more dangerous for her

"I'm alright, I'm okay." She says quickly, looking at me, and I let out the breath I had been holding.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Kylen barks angrily.

I shrug, and don't bother replying because anything that I do say will just piss him off anyway. Me breathing pisses him off.

"Get the fuck out of here before I decide that the torture I inflicted earlier was not enough and we go for another round," Kylen threatens, his eyes filling with a dark and twisted joy.

The temperature drops, Ribit's eyes flare with such anger that I am truly surprised when Kylen doesn't seem to notice.

My eyes connect with hers.

"Go to your room, Coen, I don't want you to get blamed for this," she says through clenched teeth.

Maybe I should argue, maybe I should insist that she doesn't do whatever she's planning, for her sake, not his, but why? I don't care what happens to Kylen, and he's already told me to leave.

So I do. I walk down the hallway, walk into my bedroom, and close the door behind me. The only reason why I even have a room here is because it would look strange if I didn't. It's been a long time since I have had a room and I'm going to miss this one.

As soon as the door closes behind me, a blood-curdling scream ricochets around the rooms, easily piercing the thick castle walls. You would think that, having heard their leader scream in obvious pain, the next sound that I would hear would be doors opening as my teammates go and check on him, but Kylan isn't liked by anyone on the team. Even those that share the same ideals and viewpoints that he does, don't actually fucking like him, so everything remains silent.

I must admit that there is a part of me that wants to go and see what she's done to him, and there's a bigger part that hopes that he's dead, but if I go out there now and he's just injured, I'll be on the receiving end of his wrath and if he's dead, I'll get blamed. So, I stay where I am and busy myself thinking about what the guys could have planned to free me.

Neith

Ribit suddenly appears in the middle of the room, making me jump.

"Hey, you were gone for a while. Is everything okay?" River asks.

Ribit's smile is wicked, and her eyes sparkle, and before she can reply, I ask, "What did you do?"

She chuckles, "You'll see. Sorry, it took a while. I wanted to make sure that I got a really good look at it so I could describe it to you properly, and not miss anything vital."

I smile, "While I want to push you to tell me what you did, I get the feeling that you

won't tell me." She shakes her head, her smile huge and confirming my suspicions. I chuckle, "Thought so."

"You managed to see it then?" Doc asks curiously.

"I'm offended by the surprise in your voice," she retorts and then smiles before Doc can get out his apology. "Yeah, I did. It wasn't too hard. Even though most supernaturals can't see me, their instincts do tend to flare up to let them know that there is something other nearby. Kylen didn't notice at all. Coen though, he saw me like you guys do and very nearly gave it away."

"Wait, he did?" Raiden asks. "Coen has no affinity with the dead."

"And he hasn't got access to his magic right now, or at least he has very limited access, he can't shift or anything like that," Reed adds.

"He can partially shift, though," Ransom reminds us.

"True, but he has never had any gift with death," Raiden repeats.

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Evander's eyebrows rise. "Yes, but we know that although it's really rare, some supernaturals develop some gifts later on."

Realization crosses through Raiden's eyes, as he remembers that River actually developed more gifts and that, according to the guys, all of their magic has been playing up recently, so it is possible that Coen has developed a new gift since they knew him properly.

"Could it be possible that the new gift has developed because his other magic has been suppressed?" Ribit asks curiously. "I have never heard of it happening before, but that doesn't mean that it's impossible."

"That's a really good point," Griff replies. "Historically, magic has always found ways to adapt to protect supernaturals. It's a part of us, and it's capable of protecting us when we're unable to. It's well known that magic has created force fields around knocked out or injured supernaturals, giving them time to recover or heal enough. It obviously doesn't happen every time, but it has happened. So I don't see why Coen couldn't have developed extra magic that could help protect him in his current situation."

"That happened to a demon when I was a kid," Reed interrupts looking thoughtful. "Pretty much like your example, he was a part of the hunting party, and they got ambushed. He got severely wounded and they were crowding around him, his magic threw up a protective shield. He had never done it before and was never able to do it again."

"So, it is definitely possible, although your example was a temporary thing and we're



thinking that Coen's is more of a gift development thanks to the dangerous situation that he is in," Doc replies.

"Yeah," Reed nods.

"It concerns me that the magic that he has been given thanks to his current situation is death magic," I reply, my heart squeezing tightly in my chest.

I fucking hate this.

Ribit's expression fills with understanding, "Whatever the reason is, he could see me, which helped a lot actually. He moved around the room while Kylen was talking to him, so Kylen would lift his head and move, so that I could get a better look. He caught on pretty fucking quickly to what I was doing."

I smile, "Yeah, that doesn't surprise me."

"I tried to grab it, but I couldn't."

## Chapter Nineteen

Neith

"Oh okay, so it's warded then. We're going to have to figure out how to take the ward off before we grab it and replace it with another one," River says, with a slight frown.

Ribit shakes her head, "Not necessarily, it might just be warded against the dead, but you should be able to figure out what it's warded against when you've got the description and can do some proper research on it."

“Do you think that you could describe it?” Ransom asks hopefully.

Ribit nods, “Yeah, absolutely. I could draw it for you exactly, but for obvious reasons, I won’t be able to hold the pencil long enough to actually draw it. I can manipulate things around me for a short amount of time, but I won’t be able to do it for the length of time that it will take to draw a proper, detailed rendition of the pendant.” She pauses, and then carries on with a slight frown, “I suppose I could draw it in stages for you, but honestly, that will take me quite a long time to do and I don’t want to delay you any more than I have to.”

“Don’t worry, we’re just grateful that you were able to get a better look at it than any of us could. It gives us a good point to start from, and if you can describe it well enough, then Ransom should be able to draw it,” Van says.

“You draw?” I ask Ransom.

He smiles, “A little bit. I’m rusty, and it is always difficult to follow someone else’s description.”

Raiden clears his throat and looks slightly uncomfortable, “If you’re comfortable with it, and it is completely fine if you’re not, I could help you have enough strength in order to draw it yourself. I have to warn you that I would need to be in my full reaper form.”

“You can?” Griff asks.

Raiden nods, “Yeah, I have done it for souls before. Sometimes they want to write letters to their loved ones, as if they were alive. It’s happened when someone has died suddenly, and they wanted to somehow lessen the blow of their sudden death by leaving their loved ones a letter to find in their belongings.”

“I have never heard of that,” Doc says.

“That’s because it’s not a normal thing to be able to do,” Ribit says, looking intrigued. “Reapers, normal ones, aren’t able to do that.”

Raiden shrugs, “I only found out that I could do it by accident, maybe no other reapers have tried.”

“I doubt that’s the reason, you’re all a lot more than even you guys realize,” she replies.

“What do you mean?” Reed asks, his eyebrows rising slightly as he watches her with caution.

This time it’s her who shrugs, “The dead know things, and they’re gossips.” It’s the only answer that she’s willing to give because she then changes the subject: “What exactly will it entail?”

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“I have to shift, and then all I do is place my hand on your shoulder, my magic will help you to stay present long enough to do the drawing,” Raiden explains. “There is really no pressure though, Ransom is better at drawing than he made out he was, and with your help he should be able to do a pretty good rendition of the necklace.”

Ribit smiles, “I’m happy to have you use your magic, it would be so much quicker than trying to explain it and making sure that I remember every little detail. If I’m completely honest, I have never been good at describing things. Plus, it will take me ten minutes maximum to draw it if I’m not interrupted, and you guys really do need to get some sleep before tomorrow.”

“All very good points,” Van agrees, glancing at Raiden.

“You’re sure?” Raiden checks one last time.

Ribit smiles, “Let’s do this.”

Raiden nods and points to a desk near the window. Ribit makes her way over to it and takes a seat, although she’s not actually sitting on it, and Reed rummages through the drawers, pulling out a pen and a piece of paper, laying them in front of her.

“Ready?” Raiden asks, and Ribit nods.

Her eyes widen as he drops his human form, and I have to admit that mine do too, because I swear that last time I saw him in this form, he was shorter, his robes were grey, and he didn’t have wings. His gorgeous wings are folded neatly on his back, as he towers over even Reed.

“Well shit dude, you’re even fucking bigger,” River exclaims.

Raiden chuckles, but the sound is deeper than his usual voice, and it does something to me that has my thighs clenching, well damn.

“So fucking hot,” I mutter and Raiden’s hooded head turns in my direction, all I can see is his eyes, a constant swirl of stars watching me with surprise.

Reed chuckles, clearly amused by my reaction, and then gets us, or well, Raiden, back on track because I’m still watching him, waiting for him to speak again. “Let’s get this done as quickly as we can, then.”

Raiden nods and places his hand on Ribit’s shoulder.

“Wow, you’re crazy powerful,” she mutters. “Not really surprising though.”

Before any of us can question her, even though we know that she most likely won’t answer, she ducks her head over the piece of paper and picks up the pen. At first, her hand flies over the page, but as she adds more details, she slows down, clearly making sure that she is getting every part of it right. I have to admit that it’s impressive to watch, and while I was expecting her to be able to draw to some extent, since she was the one who suggested that she could draw it, I didn’t expect her to be able to draw as well as she is.

Her expression is so peaceful, making it obvious that this is something that she really loves to do, and maybe even hasn’t been able to for a long time. Can the dead draw? Like by using things from their plane of existence rather than ours? She’s mentioned that the dead are gossips, so that means that she can at least talk to the other dead, even if she doesn’t actually want to cross over. I suppose it would be a question to either ask her or ask Winston, because he should know.

I am really missing my sarcastic little friend, and I hope that he makes a reappearance soon. I haven't even seen Wallace, or the fox that was beginning to make a regular appearance at the house.

"Can spirit guides not come here?" I ask suddenly in the silence of the room, without meaning to.

Ribit looks up at me, "Spirit guides are allowed in the realm, but they aren't allowed to be a part of the Choosing. Any participant of the Choosing who has a spirit guide won't be able to get in contact with them because it is seen as an unfair advantage. The Choosing is incredibly powerful and actually blocks the spirit guides, so they couldn't get through even if they wanted to."

"Oh, we never knew that," River says with a frown.

Ribit shrugs and goes back to her drawing as she answers, "It's not common knowledge since very few supes actually have a spirit guide. No one knows who you are, so no one would have thought to tell you about it."

"Who I am?" I ask with a smile.

She rolls her eyes, "Oh come on, you know I know who your parents are," she pauses and then smiles and adds, "and a couple of other things that I won't be sharing. Now hush, I'm concentrating."

I share a smile with Doc, who happens to catch my eye, and no one dares to say anything else.

It only takes her five more minutes, and then she leans back in her seat and smiles down at the drawing, "Done."

Raiden immediately lets go of her shoulder and shifts back to his human form. I must not keep my disappointment off my face because he immediately strides over to me, and kisses me deeply, his hand threading through my hair and holding me in place.

Resting his head against mine, he says barely above a whisper, “I love your reaction to me in my shifted form.”

I grin, “That’s good because I’m going to need you to at least use that voice more often.”

His eyebrows rise in surprise, “Oh really.”

I nod.

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“Erm, as interesting as this conversation is, you guys really should be getting some sleep, the trial planned for tomorrow is a big one,” Ribit interrupts.

Stepping back from Raiden, I give her an apologetic look, “Sorry.”

She smiles, “Oh please, don’t worry about it. I’m definitely not shy and retiring.”

“Thank fuck for that,” I grin.

My response startles a laugh out of her, and she gestures to the desk with the piece of paper on it, “That’s as good as I can get it. I don’t think I forgot anything, but I will go back at some point and have another glance to make sure. The best person to ask if it’s right is Coen, I bet that he knows exactly what it looks like. You just need to make sure that Kylen doesn’t get suspicious, he will take it out on Coen.”

My expression darkens, “We’ll make sure that he doesn’t find out.” I add with a sharp smile, “Or I’ll kill him.”

“I can help with that,” she replies with absolutely no hesitation at all and a smile that matches mine.

Before I can agree, and take her up on her offer though Griff interrupts.

Leveling me with a look, he says, “No killing him, at least not yet. That’s a last resort.”

I share a look with Ribit, and she smiles.



“What was that look?” Ransom asks suspiciously.

I try to look innocent, “Nothing.”

“I don’t believe you,” Doc adds, narrowing his eyes slightly and trying not to smile.

“Smart man,” Ribit replies immediately, and I burst out laughing.

The guys are all giving me looks, so I reassure them, “Don’t worry, I know that I can’t kill him unless we really don’t have a choice, I know that it could affect Coen negatively, and I would never do anything that would put him in harm’s way.”

“We know that, but we also know how much you want to help him and how the timeline is not great. We all hate it as well,” Van replies.

“I know,” I reply. “We will get him out, and Kylen will face the consequences of his actions.”

“If you do need my help while you’re here, let me know,” Ribit offers.

I smile and reach out, giving her a tight hug, “Thank you. You’ve helped us loads. I’ll come and see you after the trial tomorrow.”

She grins, “Deal.”

“You really shouldn’t be able to do that,” Griff mutters.

Ribit laughs, “Just you wait, you’re going to be saying that a lot. Now off you go.”

We all say goodbye and then head out of the room with the incredibly detailed drawing in Raiden’s hand. He will look after it until we can get back home and into

the library to do some proper research.

I really hate the delay, but it makes sense, and there really isn't another way around it, not without taking a big risk with Coen, and none of us are willing to take that risk. Especially since it obviously has some protection wards on it because Ribit couldn't grab it. I would be very surprised if it were only warded against the dead.

As soon as we get down to my floor, the only thoughts on my mind involve sleep and cuddles.

"We need to grab your stuff from your room," Doc says.

"Oh, I forgot about that," I reply. "Let's grab it quickly, I don't think I'm going to be awake for much longer."

"Me neither," Van replies with a yawn that nearly takes over his entire face.

It's obvious that we're all feeling the effects of the very long and emotional day that we've had, and to be honest, I'm surprised that it has taken this long to catch up to us. Thankfully, I didn't unpack since I didn't see the point, so all we have to do is grab my bags, and I grab my nice bathing products that Mabel gave me, because I actually planned to take them home with me and maybe see if Mabel would give me some more. They really are awesome, and my hair has never looked or felt better, even though it's been in a braid the whole time that we've been here, because it just makes more sense.

When we get to the guy's room, they let me shower first, most likely because my eyes are taking longer and longer between blinks to actually open again. It doesn't take me very long to shower, although I hate that I have to put proper clothes on, and I vow to myself that I will be walking around naked when I get home.

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“Naked?” Reed asks, heat in his eyes and a smile playing around the edge of his lips.

I frown slightly, and then my eyes widen, “Shit, are my shields down? Can you read my mind?”

Reed chuckles and grabs my hand, pulling me further into the apartment and into a bedroom.

“No, you said that out loud.” He chuckles and points to the bed. “Get in, I’ll be in after my shower.”

I nod, too sleepy to bother trying to reply, and I swear before my head even hits the pillow, I’m fast asleep. I only vaguely wake up when the bed dips on either side of me, and I settle into the cuddles that I have desperately missed since coming to the castle. It’s amazing how quickly I got used to not sleeping alone.

I have really missed my men.

???

The pulling sensation of the portal pulls me from dreamland, and I open my eyes just in time to catch myself as the ground rushes up to meet me.

“Fuck, shit, damn. That fucking hurt!” River exclaims colorfully from somewhere to my left.

I’m guessing from his reaction that he didn’t manage to catch himself before he face-

planted the floor.

“Is everyone good?” Van asks, ignoring River’s outburst.

Standing up, I get a good look at our surroundings and try to work out what the task is and if we’re in any immediate danger. Thanks to my near miss with the floor, I’m not surprised to see that we’re standing in the middle of a forest. Huge trees tower around us, thick underbrush surrounds us completely, and there is a definite chill in the air. The tree canopy is pretty densely packed, but I can just about see the light filtering through the leaves, so it’s at least day time wherever we are.

“I’m good,” I reply to Evander, slightly delayed.

“Neith!” River exclaims happily as he runs over to me and picks me up, spinning me around in a circle. “I am so fucking happy that you are here.”

“Me too,” I grin, as he puts me back down. I can see in his expression that he wants to kiss me, but clearly thinks better of it because we’re on camera, which is the easiest way I have found to phrase that we’re being filmed.

He smirks when I pout and mutters, “Later.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” I reply, reaching up and rubbing some dirt off his nose from where he landed in it when we first arrived.

His expression softens, and he smiles, squeezing me once more before stepping back.

“Any idea what we’re supposed to be doing?” Reed asks, stretching and revealing a strip of toned stomach that has me practically drooling.

Holy fuck nuggets what is wrong with me this morning, I need to get my head in the

game. This is no time to get distracted by wanting to climb them. Of course, my mind being, well, mine, throws the image of Coen with his face buried between my thighs, and I internally curse myself out as I reluctantly force the image away and refocus.

“I don’t think that we should stay here, we’re like sitting ducks,” Doc says.

“Good point,” Van says. Looking around us at the densely packed woodland, he adds with a frown, “But which way should we go?”

“Maybe we just need to start walking and hope that we get a clue about what we’re supposed to be doing?” Griff suggests.

“Alright, it’s as good a plan as any with the information that we’ve got. Keep an eye out for anything suspicious, and weapons or magic at the ready, just in case we need them,” Evander orders. “I don’t like how quiet it is.”

“Agreed,” Raiden says.

We all follow Van’s lead as he heads in a direction that is completely random. I just hope he hasn’t done a ‘me’ and we’re not heading in the entirely wrong direction. Despite the fact that we all got to bed late last night and got pulled out of bed to come here, I am feeling surprisingly well-rested. Honestly, that’s probably because I had cuddles from the guy’s last night and so I slept better. I’m not sure which ones because I barely stirred when they got into bed, and we all sort of landed sporadically when we arrived, but the point is, I obviously sleep a lot better with cuddles.

I think most people do, or at least most people sleep better when sharing a bed. I must admit that I get to a point where I want my space while I sleep, and I’ll grab a hand, or put my foot on my bed partner instead. Maybe that’s just me though.

Chapter Twenty

Neith

I was so tired last night after the massive and very busy day that I didn't even have time to worry that my nightmares would come back, thanks to my most recent panic attack. Again, I'm pretty sure that having the guys in the bed with me helped prevent the nightmares from resurfacing, and if any did, I don't remember them.

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My eyes catch on the cuff around my wrist, obviously I didn't take it off to sleep. Not only did I forget because I pretty much showered with my eyes closed I was that tired, but it also wouldn't have been a good idea, because the cuff would have still been off this morning, which would mean that within twelve-ish hours of been told by the unicorn not to show anyone, I would have already told most of the supernatural world that I had a tattoo thing from a unicorn.

I mean it's highly likely that not all of them would understand or even notice the mark, but the ones that would are the ones that I wouldn't want to know about it, the dangerous ones. I would most likely be hunted. Of course, there's a big chance that I'm going to be hunted anyway, HID is going to know that I'm alive, and we're going to have to deal with that whole thing when this ends. There is a small naive part of me that is hoping that they either won't find out I'm alive, or that they decide I'm too big of a threat and leave me alone.

I know that's naive especially since we're fairly certain that the Blue Fucker is the person that was interested in me and is having HID give him supernaturals. It makes a lot of sense.

The more I think about everything that has happened since we arrived here, the more worried I am that when we leave and everything finally slows back down, or at least as slow as it ever does, when that happens, I fear that everything that has happened is going to come crashing down on top of me. If that happens, the nightmares will pick back up regardless of who is with me when I sleep, and things are going to get violent. The guys' walls are going to have holes in them. Especially since Betty is sentient now, and I will probably find her in my hands regardless of where I put her, and if I've asked her to come to me. If I'm having a nightmare, she will appear.

Oh, and I scream.

“Huh, maybe I should get everyone earplugs,” I mutter accidentally aloud.

“Why?” Ransom asks curiously from just ahead of me.

I wince slightly, “Sorry, that was an inside thought that became an outside thought without my permission. It happens a lot.”

Van chuckles, he’s well aware of my inside, outside thought issue. He dealt with it for years before we parted ways. That’s probably not the accurate way to describe what happened when Van left for the magical college, but that’s what I’m going with right now.

“Are you going to explain?” Reed grins.

Van looks back over his shoulder and smiles fondly, “You probably don’t want her to. You’d end up falling down a rabbit hole that no one will get out of again.”

“Well, that was rude,” I smirk.

Van’s eyebrow rises, “Am I wrong?”

I shake my head and try not to smile, “That’s not the point.”

“It was my point,” Van retorts immediately, and I burst out laughing.

We walk for a bit longer, listening for anything that sounds vaguely suspicious or threatening. All I can hear is the usual sounds that you find in the woods, and nothing that I find particularly concerning. However, that doesn’t mean that we aren’t being watched or stalked.



The voices are murmuring quietly in the background of my mind, and show absolutely no sign that there is anything wrong, which reassures me further that we are currently alone and not under threat. The longer that we walk though the more twitchy I get. I really don't like not knowing what is expected of me and what is going to happen, it makes me far more nervous than if I was doing something.

"Huh, that's odd," Doc mutters.

"What?" River asks.

Doc pauses, making us all do the same as we wonder what he's talking about. He looks up at a tree to our left, a particularly tall and judging from the size of the trunk, an incredibly old tree. Studying it, I try to find what he thinks is odd about it, it just looks like a tree to me, albeit massive, and then I see it. Far up on the trunk, and well into the canopy of the tree, is a hole. Possibly used as a nest for whatever creatures live in these woods, but there is something glittering and glinting inside, and from what I can tell from my vantage point, this far down, it isn't an animal or something that should be inside a tree.

At least it shouldn't be from what I know, but we have no idea what realm we're in, and therefore, we don't know what is normal for this realm. So, for all I know, sparkly glittery things high up in holes in trees are perfectly normal.

"Oh, I see," Ransom says, as he points up at the hole.

"Yeah, that doesn't look like it belongs," Raiden agrees. "It could be something to do with Choosing?"

"Maybe, I guess there's one way to find out," Reed says, and then frowns. "I can't fly up there, I don't think any of us will be able to, our wingspans are too wide, and the trees are too close together."

“Damn it, you’re right,” Griff grumbles, staring up at the sparkly thing.

It only takes a moment before they’re all discussing how to get to it, with suggestions about spells, throwing someone, and everything else in between. I can’t help but smile at the way that they are overcomplicating it, and decide to leave them to it, and grab it myself.

I have always been good at climbing, mostly because I have always enjoyed being ‘up’. Anywhere, I always like to be high. I have no idea why, I just do. In fact, in my little house back in the town where Pete is, I did sleep in a hammock for a while. I loved being high up, but I missed being able to spread out, and when I had a nightmare, I kept falling out of it, so I reluctantly went back to sleeping in a bed.

I have climbed too many trees to count, but this time I try to coax some of that reluctant magic of mine forward, which comes easily, but again is still only a small portion. I’m not sure how I know that only a small portion of my magic is responding to me, but I do, and I’m not questioning it.

Using the extra boost that my magic has given me, I easily climb up the massive tree trunk, wishing that I were barefoot, since I absolutely adore climbing trees with no shoes.

“Erm, I don’t think we need to figure it out,” Ransom says, with a smile in his voice.

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“What, why?” Doc asks curiously, he must look up and see me nearly at the sparkly hole, sounds dirty, because he says, “Oh.”

“Careful, Nene, we have no idea what it is,” Evander calls up.

“Don’t worry, I’m not just going to stick my hand in and grab it, without checking it out more,” I call back. “I have no desire to lose a hand.”

“You know, you guys are talking so loudly that there is a good chance that if that is a creature or guarded by something, you have definitely let it know that you’re there,” River points out.

I roll my eyes, not that any of them can see because I’m now throwing myself up over the branches as I get closer to where the sparkle is coming from.

“I would just like to point out that I didn’t start yelling loudly first and that all of you were talking pretty loudly before I did,” I call down, since it’s too late now and anything that was going to be disturbed has been by this point.

“She has a point,” Reed chuckles.

I decide to ignore them since I’m now almost to the hole. Moving a lot more cautiously than I was moments ago, I edge up as slowly as I can move. I only have a brief moment to marvel at the fact that I’m clinging to a tree, ridiculously high in the air, and I’m not struggling, before I force myself to refocus. It would be just my luck to die because my brain had gone off on a random tangent and forgot what I was supposed to be doing.

Actually, when I die for real, I bet that's the way I go.

A noise from below pulls me out of my once again wandering thoughts.

Sparkly thing in the tree. Could die. Focus.

With that short reminder ringing through my ears, I peek inside the hole, my eyes widen, and I can't help the giant smile that crosses my expression.

"Well?" River calls up from below.

"Give her a minute," Ransom replies.

I know that the suspense is killing him. I'm actually surprised that he isn't up . . . My thought cuts off as River suddenly appears next to me, perching on a nearby branch, clearly having started climbing when he asked the question.

His grin is huge, and I burst out laughing at the adorable expression he's wearing.

He shrugs, "Sorry, I got a bit impatient."

I grin and shake my head, "Of course you did. Look! It's a fucking gemstone of some kind. It's huge!"

I move out of the way so that River can get a good look inside the hole, and his eyes widen just like mine did. It's big enough that I would struggle to carry it in one hand, it's a sphere and completely smooth.

"I have never seen a gemstone that looks like that before," River mutters. "It almost looks like a cross between moonstone, amethyst, and obsidian, but with sparkles and its own glow." He glances at me, "It is glowing, right? You see that as well?"

I nod, “Yep, it’s definitely glowy. Do you think we can touch it?”

River shrugs, still perched on his branch and not wavering in the slightest. “I don’t know. Can you get on the branch next to you, and I’ll see if I can get a better look?”

I nod and shift around so that I can hook my leg over the branch that he suggested. I pull myself onto it with far more ease than I’m used to, and it’s a surprise. Although it has just occurred to me that I was gripping onto the trunk of the tree, and there wasn’t really anything to hold onto.

How the fuck was I staying up?

River’s eyes haven’t moved from my face, and he smiles softly, “You’ve just realized, haven’t you?”

I nod, and swallow thickly, slightly freaked out, “I, how?”

Understanding fills River’s eyes, “That’s why I’m up here, we were worried that you would realize and then freak out and could panic enough that you would let go, and it’s a long fucking way to fall.”

I just stare at him.

They realized way before I did, and they wanted to make sure that I didn’t get hurt.

“You guys are just so fucking awesome, have I told you that?” I say. Wishing that I could accurately put into words how much it means to me that they simply care. Because to some people it may be a simple thing, but to me it’s really not.

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I am also aware that this is a Choosing trial and we're being watched, I don't want to get all mushy, and we are trying to keep the more romantic side of our relationship under wraps, which means I can't kiss him stupid.

"We know," River grins. "Right, let's see what this thing is."

"Wait," I say as River moves out onto the trunk, balancing where I was moments ago.

"Yeah?" River asks, his eyebrow raised curiously.

I swallow slightly nervously, "Erm, I know this is a ridiculous question, but how the fuck do I get back down?"

"The same way that you got up," he replies. "I have every faith that you can make it down the same way, you can absolutely do it, but if you need help, I can carry you." His smile becomes full of mischief as his eyes sparkle, "Hell, any excuse to have your legs wrapped around me."

I burst out laughing, and his eyes light up with an entirely different emotion, so much for keeping the romantic side of our relationship quiet. To be fair, people probably won't think much of it.

I want to reply with something that is definitely not appropriate to be overheard by anyone but River, and possibly the other guys. Thankfully, my brain to mouth filter seems to sort of work.

"You have no idea how difficult it is for me not to say what's on my mind right

now,” I say, which is only marginally better than just saying it.

Actually no scratch that, what I was thinking would make a pornstar blush. So maybe that was better, yay, go me.

River opens his mouth before thinking better of it and shaking his head instead.

“Is everything okay up there?” Doc calls up, a knowing lilt in his voice.

“Yep, all good.” River calls back down. He levels me with a look and gets us back on track, “I would be willing to bet that this has something to do with Choosing, but we need to get it down to the others so they can have a look and see what they think.”

“Good idea,” I agree. “Raider will probably know what it is, or at least what it’s made of.”

“Exactly,” River replies, he begins to reach into the hole to grab the gemstone ball.

“Hang on, don’t you think you should check if it’s got any spells on it that are guarding it. You know ones that trigger when the thing is moved and then the whole tree blows up, or you grow an extra head,” I ask, in my rambling kind of way that I know River can follow because his brain goes off on tangents just like mine does.

His eyebrows rise, “Great description. You have a point.” He glances down, “Ransom can you . . .”

Before he can finish his sentence, Ransom throws something up to him. I have to admit that I’m impressed that Ransom manages to throw it, and it doesn’t go in the completely wrong direction, and I am even more surprised that River manages to catch it without nearly falling from the tree.

It doesn't take a lot to impress me.

"What's that?" I ask, swinging my legs on either side of the branch that I'm sitting on.

River holds it up so that I can see the little vial better, "It's a spell that Ransom has designed. All I have to do is open it near the hole and if the misty stuff inside turns a different color then it means there is a spell protecting it."

"That's really cool," I reply.

River nods, "Yeah it is. Ransom's a genius when it comes to spells. This one is even cooler because it changes color depending on what kind of spell is guarding the object, or space, and how dangerous it is."

"That's really clever. For the obvious reasons, but with the color coding it means that there is less risk involved when you come to disarming it."

River opens the little vial and holds it up to the hole, "Exactly. Ransom makes a small amount of them for SID, it's not easily replicated, which means that he's the only one able to do it. He makes as many as he can without depleting his magic."

I smile, and open my mouth to reply, but immediately get distracted by the changing colors. It seems to cycle through a couple different ones before it settles on green.

"What does that mean?" I ask, far more excited than I probably should be considering it could mean that we're about to blow up.

I don't know why I always go to blowing shit up, probably because I like explosions so much, even though I now have first-hand experience of exploding. What can I say I like big bangs and fire.



“Green is good,” River replies with a smile as he corks the vial again and drops it back down to Ransom, who catches it with ease and pockets it.

With no more hesitation, River reaches into the hole and pulls out the gemstone. I’m calling it a gemstone because that’s the closest thing I know of that matches its description. It could be anything, but until I know differently, I’m going to go with a gemstone. A super fucking pretty one.

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“Yay, no exploding today,” I deadpan.

River chuckles, “We need to head back down, do you want a lift?”

I think about it for a moment and shake my head, “Nah, I’ve got this. I got up here after all. Maybe let me go first though so if I do fall, I’m not going to land on you and hurt you, or make you drop the gem and cause us to lose the trial.”

River’s eyebrow rises, “Like hell. I’ll go down first, and I will catch you if you fall.” His expression fills with fire, “Always. Got it?”

I swallow thickly as an unexpected wedge of emotion tries to escape, in a voice that gives away just how much his words have affected me, I reply, “Got it.”

River’s eyes flash to those of his kitsune, and he takes a deep breath before he nods once and then starts to move down the truck so there’s enough room for me to move out onto the trunk as well.

“We’ll go slow, there’s no rush,” he says gently as I move out onto the trunk. His voice becomes teasing as he adds, “I’ve got a fan-fucking-tastic view. Damn, Neith.”

I burst out laughing, the comment easily cutting through my nerves, and when I glance down at him, and see him smiling, I know that was his intention.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Neith

I really shouldn't have worried, my magic keeps me stuck to the trunk, although I have no idea how, and we swiftly move down. Before I know it, my feet touch the floor and I turn around to look at the guys with a giant smile, finding them all smiling at me proudly.

"Well done!" Reed grins as he pulls me in for a tight hug, lifting my feet off the ground and then only just stopping himself in time before he kisses me. As he puts me down he growls, "For fuck sake."

I grin and pat him on the chest, "It's alright."

"I beg to differ," Reed mutters seriously.

"Me too," River adds.

"And me," Doc smirks, his eyes flashing gold as they meet mine.

"I'm pretty sure we're all in agreement that it is not alright," Ransom points out.

"Agreed," Evander says.

Griff's eyes study me closely, "I'm tempted to suggest that we throw caution to the wind, but then logic dictates that we don't."

Raiden sighs heavily, "Caution is unfortunately and regretfully right in this case. It's okay, we can make up for it."

My eyebrows rise, and my lips tilt up into a smile, "Oh, I am so going to hold you guys to that."

"Good," Reed replies. He glances at the sphere still in River's hand, "Wow, that's

pretty. What the fuck is it?”

“We figured that it was some sort of gemstone,” I reply.

River looks at Raiden and holds it up for him to take, “Any ideas?”

Raiden takes it from River and studies it closely. As he opens his mouth to reply, there’s a flash of light.

Everyone moves with precision and ease, all of our weapons are drawn, and magic is heavy in the air, as everyone prepares to attack. It only takes a couple of moments to realize that we aren’t about to be attacked, but rather the Choosing has done its thing, kind of like when I was doing my trial with the levels, and hanging in the air, in glowing script, is what we need to do.

Van reads it out loud, “Take the Bellator Lapis, and deliver it to the highest cave, north of this point.”

“Well, that’s nice and vague,” River adds.

“Bellator Lapis?” Griff asks.

“It literally translates as Warrior Gemstone, which is an interesting name,” I reply immediately.

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“You know Latin?” Raiden asks, looking impressed. “I think I remember you mentioning it before.”

I nod, “Yeah, it came in handy for what I did. A lot of supernatural stuff is in Latin, or a language that is close enough that you can figure it out.”

“You mean Fae?” Doc asks, his eyebrows lifting in surprise.

I nod, “Yeah, it’s pretty close to Latin.”

“You can understand Fae?” Reed asks.

Again, I nod, “Yeah, well, I could probably get by easily enough, but it’s only by picking up bits and pieces here and there. I probably know far more curse words than anything else, but that’s mostly because I’ve had to curse a couple of Fae out a few times.”

“You’ve cursed Fae out?” Griff asks. He then quickly adds, “Don’t answer that, that is probably a conversation best had at a different time.”

“Griff’s right, we need to find this cave, something tells me that’s not going to be as easy as simply taking the gem there,” Doc agrees.

“Oh, it definitely won’t be,” I reply.

We all start heading north, that’s where the glowing words said that we should head. Currently, all I can see are trees. I feel like this trial is going to require a lot of

walking.

We've been walking for a while, with nothing but the sounds of the forest accompanying us and my colorful curses, ruining the apparent peace. It's not my fault, I know that we should be moving stealthily, and I have been, but it seems that every branch and every root, hell even the fucking bushes, are intent on tripping me up or snagging my clothes. I am not making a good impression at all, and I don't mean on the supernaturals watching, I couldn't really give a shit about what they think of me, they're all strangers that it's very unlikely I will ever meet. I mean that I'm not making a very good impression on the guys.

Crashing through the woods and having to be caught so I don't land on my face, is not exactly showing them how capable I am and I'm actually still new to their team, and because of that I want to prove to them that I'm worthy of being on the team, even if I know that I don't need to prove it.

They know what I'm capable of, we've actually done quite a lot together at this point, but it's still important to me to show that we can work really well as a team. For the Choosing as well, I really don't want to get put on the Draconian team.

After the third time that I trip over a root, I mutter, "I swear the trees are trying to get to me."

Reed looks over at me, watching as my clothes get tangled in branches again, and frowns, "I think they're reaching for you."

"What!" I exclaim. "I was joking, I didn't seriously think that the trees have it out for me."

Ransom frowns, "I don't think they have it out for you. Meaning that I don't think that they mean any malice by it."

“Well then, why are they making it exceptionally hard for me to walk?” I ask, as I continue to walk forward.

Ransom shrugs, “I have no idea.”

Griff frowns, “It is curious. Try asking it to give you some space to walk?”

“It, who?” I reply.

“The forest,” River confirms for Griff. “It might just be curious.”

I hear what he’s not saying, the forest is curious about me because I’m an oddity, either as a nearly human, or it can sense my mom’s angel blood, and it’s reacting to that. It’s very unlikely that the forest has ever seen either of those things, or if it has seen an angel, then it hasn’t seen one for a very long time. Which means it’s curious.

I shrug, it’s worth a go, “Forest, I appreciate that you’re curious, but I really do need to be able to move easily, so that we can accomplish our task, and I don’t die or give away our position.”

Sure enough, the forest immediately retreats to normal, and I breathe a sigh of relief that I’m no longer tripping over everything or getting things tangled in my hair.

“Huh, it worked,” Raiden says, with surprise.

“Thank you, forest,” I tell the trees before looking at Raiden and raising my eyebrow. “Why do you sound so surprised?”

He shrugs, “Because I didn’t think it would, forest spirits like this rarely listen to anyone and tend to just do their own thing.”

“Oh,” I reply. Looking around at the forest, I add, “In that case, thank you for listening, I really appreciate it.”

I have no idea if it can understand me, but I think it’s important to say thank you when it’s needed. Unless you’re dealing with certain types of Fae, and then it’s really not a good idea. Those ones take your thanks as a sign that you are indebted to them until death, and then can ask of you whatever they desire, and it’s very rarely simple or nice things.



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There is a reason why there is so much cautionary lore when it comes to the Fae in the Earth Realm, it's well earned. We all fall silent as we move through the trees, and thankfully, this time, I remain silent in my movements as well.

Thank fuck.

The further that we walk through the trees, the more on edge we all become. I really thought that something would have jumped out at us by this point, and Asael is buzzing impatiently in hand, clearly as bored as I am. I'm half tempted to put him on my back, but I know that the second I do that, something will come out of the trees and try to eat me.

I pull a face, of course, I wouldn't be bored if that happened. Is it worth the risk?

"Whatever you are thinking of doing right now, don't do it," Van says with a knowing smirk.

I sigh dramatically, "Fine, spoil sport."

"I think I see a break in the trees up ahead," Griff says suddenly.

My excitement picks back up, finally, a change of scenery.

We all follow Griff as he switches to take the lead, and sure enough, I soon see the break in the trees that Griff was talking about. It's not a clear gap, it could honestly be just a slightly thinner patch of trees, but at this point I pretty much have everything crossed that there really is something different beyond the trees. Maybe even

something a bit stabby that would be fun.

I don't know what it says about me that I want to run into something that wants to kill me, but I am certain that it's not good, so maybe that's one of those things that we don't ever tell a therapist.

Yeah, because that's a sane plan.

Thankfully, it's at that moment that we step through the break and find ourselves at the very edge of the woods. Stretching before us is a rocky and deserted landscape. There are deep crevices and high rocky outcroppings; none of them show a cave, but in the distance, I can make out a sheer cliff wall. It stretches in either direction as far as the eye can see, and I can see pretty damn far. It's impressive and intimidating in the sheer size of it, and quite frankly, I kind of miss the woods.

"Well, at least we know where we've got to go," River says. He points, "The cave has got to be high up on that wall somewhere."

"Well, Griff and I aren't hampered by the trees and space anymore, we could fly ahead and see if we can find the cave, so at least we know what direction we're supposed to be heading in," Reed suggests.

"Yeah, that's a great idea actually, it will be easier to find now and head in the right direction instead of getting to the cliff face and trying to find it, we have no idea what's over there. It looks like this rocky terrain leads straight to the cliffside, but it could be that there's a massive crevice there or some sort of obstacle that's going to make it difficult to search that close to the cliff," Raiden replies.

Van nods, "It's settled then, be as quick as you can, we're quite exposed out here. Does anyone recognize what realm we're in?"

“No idea,” Griff replies with a frown. Everyone else shakes their heads that they have no idea either and Griff continues, “The problem is that there are a few realms that all look similar, so unless you go to one of the ones that has a defining and obvious feature about it, like the one that’s surface is nearly all lava, and the inhabitants live within the ground rather than on top of it, you have no real way of knowing where you are unless you speak to the inhabitants.”

“That’s a really good point,” Doc agrees. “But sometimes you’re better off not meeting the locals, there are quite a few realms where they aren’t very hospitable to outsiders.”

Ransom frowns, “Yeah, I’ve heard some pretty awful stories. Let’s get this done as quickly as we can. I don’t like that it looks like late afternoon. I don’t want to be still here when night falls.”

River pulls a face, “We were in the woods for a long time.”

“Don’t forget time could work differently here, their days could be shorter,” Raiden reminds, and River nods.

“We’ll be back as soon as we can,” Reed says, as both he and Griff transform.

Well, Griff transforms into all of his gargoyle glory, but Reed only lets his wings free.

“Be careful,” I tell them, as I bite my lip with worry. Something isn’t sitting right with me, but I think it’s because I don’t like the idea of us splitting up. That never works out well for anyone in the movies.

Griff smiles, “Don’t worry, we will.”

I nod, but don't reply as I watch them take off. I don't dare take my eyes off them as that feeling of unease grows.

"Guys, something's not right," I finally say when the feeling gets too much.

As soon as the words leave my mouth, there's a massive explosion, and a geyser of lava shoots high in the air heading straight for Reed and Griff. I call out in panic, and feel magic surge from beside me as a familiar glowing golden light wraps around them and pulls them out of the way of the lava stream just in time.

Relief fills me as I glance to the side and see Ransom watching the guys closely, as he controls the magic around them. Just as we all breathe a sigh of relief, thinking that they're safe, another geyser erupts, and seems to set off a chain reaction that has multiple streams of what at least looks like lava shooting high in the air.

"Fucking lava," Doc curses. "After this whole experience, I now have a very strong dislike of lava. I was indifferent before."

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“Oh, I am definitely there with you,” Van agrees. He looks at Ransom, “Can you bring them back? How long can you hold the protection?”

Ransom looks at Van with surprise in his eyes, “For as long as I need to.”

I get the feeling that he’s putting on the strain in his voice because he should, so he doesn’t let on how strong he is, and not because he’s actually struggling. Evander must assume the same thing because his eyebrow does this tiny little twitch, and Ransom pulls an equally minute expression in return, and that’s that.

You only get that sort of level of easy and subtle communication from working and living with each other for a long time. It’s impressive.

“Pull them in as quickly as you can then,” Van orders without missing a beat.

Ransom nods and starts muttering under his breath, using hand gestures as well to bring the guys closer, dodging and weaving through all of the streams of magic. Although I suspect that both the muttering and the gestures are unnecessary for him to do as well.

The guy’s got quite far across before the lava decided to try to eat them. Does lava eat things? I don’t think normal lava does, but this isn’t normal lava, it’s supernatural lava, so maybe it does?

Ransom’s brow is beginning to furrow with the effort of having to go around all of the sudden explosions of lava. It gets to the point where I am genuinely concerned that he is pushing himself too far. The glowing ball holding Reed and Griff flashes on

and off briefly before Ransom gets it back around them just in time to avoid a lava stream.

“Shit, are you okay man?” River asks Ransom.

Ransom grimaces, “Something is fighting against me. It’s pulling on the other side of the bubble that I have wrapped around the guys, meaning that I’m having to put in twice as much effort to get them here, and dodge through the streams of lava.”

“Can we help?” Doc asks, looking worried.

Following my instincts, I move to Ransom’s side, and he glances down at me, allowing me to see the worry in his eyes that the situation we’re in is causing him. I step closer to him, and since his hands are busy and I think that they are actually helping now, I slide my arm around him and lift up the side of his shirt slightly so I can rest my fingertips against his bare skin. He looks down at me, confused for a brief moment, before a surge of magic flows from me to him.

“Fucking hell, gorgeous,” he mutters quietly, barely above a whisper. He smiles softly, full of pride, as he leans over and kisses my forehead, “Thank you.”

I smile proudly and, at a normal tone, say, “You’ve got this, bring them back.”

Honestly, I have no idea if I’ve just messed up by helping Ransom, but it’s not like I was going to let him struggle, and I definitely wasn’t going to let Reed and Griff die just because we don’t want people to know what we’re capable of, or that I’m not actually human. I’m hoping that no one picked up on it and that, if anything, they will just assume that we’re together.

“We’ll help,” Doc suggests. “We can lend our power to help boost yours.”

Ransom smiles and nods, “Please, I won’t be able to do it on my own.”

I know for a fact that I’ve just lent him enough power, but as the guys surround us both and lay their hands on Ransom, I realize that it’s for show. Anyone who was watching would have seen that Ransom was struggling. If he stopped struggling the moment that I touched him, then it would be obvious that I’m the one who helped. So by all of us touching him, then we’re all lending our magic and helping, so it looks less impressive.

Within a few short moments, Griff and Reed are back.

“That was fucking close,” Griff says immediately when the golden bubble drops.

“You have no idea,” Ransom mutters.

“So, flying is out then.” River states. “Which means we’re going to have to thread our way through the rocks and hope that we’re heading in the right direction.”

“It’s not ideal, but we can do it,” Van replies. “We need to move as quickly as we can, we definitely don’t want to be caught out here in the dark, especially since we don’t know for certain which direction that we need to head in, but we also need to be really careful.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Neith

“Agreed, I don’t think the lava geysers are the only thing hidden out there,” Griff adds.

“Is that a normal feeling or magic-fueled?” Reed asks.

“Magic,” Griff replies simply.

Reed nods, and we all step further away from the woods and the safety that the trees gave us. We move together, keeping a close eye on everything around us, as we move over the rocky ground, making sure that we don’t get too close to any of the geysers that have now fallen silent again.

“They’ve stopped,” Doc points out as we move between two huge boulders. “Which suggests that they were triggered.”



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“That would mean that there is something here that needs to be defended,” Raiden says, his eyebrow raised.

“That can’t be good,” I reply.

“It could just be natural defenses,” River suggests.

As we round the corner, we suddenly find ourselves face to face with a group of supernaturals that absolutely do not look friendly. Their expressions are fierce, they’re holding spears that are on fire, and the few that don’t have weapons are engulfed in flames themselves. With dark red skin, huge ears that look like fennec fox ears perched on top of their heads, except the skin is covered in scales, eyes that are too big for their heads and slit like a snakes, plus the long and pointed snouts that are currently all snarling at us, they don’t exactly portray a picture of welcome.

“You were saying, River?” Griff murmurs out of the side of his mouth, and I try not to smirk.

“Wishful thinking,” River retorts.

“Hello, we don’t want to cause you any trouble, we’re just heading over to the cliffs,” Evander explains calmly.

It’s clear from the way that they suddenly appeared and their aggressive body language that they have no intention of talking through anything peacefully, but Evander has to try. None of us wants to end up in conflict with the locals if we can avoid it, and especially not over a misunderstanding. There is a small chance that they

have come at us aggressively because they think that we're intruders intending to hurt them.

"You will not get safe passage through us until you pay," one of them says as he moves forward and stands in front of the group.

He's bigger than the others, and I would be willing to bet that he is the one in charge.

I glance at River, he was still holding the giant gemstone a moment ago, and if they see it, then I'm pretty sure that it will be what they insist on having in order to allow us to pass. We obviously can't give it to them, we need it in order to pass this trial, the instructions were pretty vague about almost everything except that we have to put the gemstone in the cave. So we won't pass if we give the gemstone to these locals to keep the peace.

Thankfully, when I look at River though, the gemstone is nowhere to be seen. I have no idea what he's done with it, or where he could have possibly put it, but that's not really a question that I can ask him now. Right now, I'm just glad that it's not in sight.

"And what is it that you require for payment?" Raiden asks, his eyebrow raised slightly.

Doc curls his lip, baring sharp teeth that I have never seen before, as he takes a step closer to me protectively, and his body tenses like he's ready to spring into action at any moment. I have never seen this side of him, with his eyes glowing gold and his fangs extended, he looks deadly, and absolutely fucking gorgeous. However, his reaction is not reassuring, and unfortunately, I am pretty sure about what has triggered it and what these supernaturals are going to ask for. I hope that I'm wrong, but Doc wouldn't react like this for no reason.

The supernaturals behind the leader shift excitedly, and my hackles rise as the voices stir in warning. The leader's eyes move to me and drag over me in a lecherous way that seems to be universal for all of these kinds of males, regardless of realm or species. River growls low in his throat in warning, and all of the guys move closer to me, anger filling their expressions, although they keep a lid on the majority of their magic, only letting a small amount free.

Instead of being put off by the guy's reaction, the leader's eyes light with challenge.

Well shit, River's growl, Doc's snarl, and the guys all moving protectively around me have increased his interest in me rather than made him think twice. He now wants me because they are being protective of me, and therefore, that means that having me would be even more of a win.

"We'll take the woman," the leader predictably says.

"No," Van replies, firmly with absolutely no room for argument.

The leader looks slightly surprised, he gestures at the supes behind him, "You are outnumbered. You would risk death for one woman?"

"Yes," is the resounding answer from all of my men.

My smile is wide as happiness sets butterflies free in my stomach. That was really fucking cute.

As they all tense, gripping their weapons tighter, I feel myself moving my fingers, in the sign that Coen, Dimitri, and I made up. I haven't actually done this sign for years, it's not like the thank you one. It's the sign that we used before we went into a difficult fight, one that we weren't sure that we would come out of. It's the one that we used to say what we couldn't say out loud, and it stabs at an old and not very well-

healed wound.

I didn't consciously choose to do it then, and I'm not sure why I did. I haven't made the sign for years and years. It was subtle enough that I really doubt that anyone has noticed it, but Coen and Dimitri would have if they were watching, and I know that Dimitri is because he came to my aid with Coen, and there is no way that he would have known that I was in trouble without seeing the Choosing.

That's probably why I've made the sign. He came and he sang, and my heart can't fucking take it. It's not only been broken by him, but torn to shreds, and I know that I am not capable of enduring any more pain from him. I barely survived it before, and I think if I had just escaped and hadn't ended up working off my sentence with HID, then I may not have survived it. Coen witnessed enough of the way that Dimitri changed to know how bad it was, and he was talking to Kar about it, and had planned to stick around until he disappeared, and I saw him less and less. I'm not really certain when the timelines cross with Coen being pulled into the Draconian team, but I must have seen him when it first started happening. If he had said something then, I might have been able to help. Although I suppose I was trying to keep my head above water and plan the escape that ended up with me being in HID. He was probably ordered not to say anything to anyone as well.

I think that I ended up in HID just as Coen and the guys all finished the magical academy and went into the training one. Possibly, they may have been in their last year of the magical academy. Honestly, I have no idea, it doesn't really matter, and I will most likely forget to ask them any time soon.

Asael zaps my hand with a small sting of magic, and I jump, trying to yell. Shit. We're in a situation, a dangerous one, and I'm going down memory lane, and trying to figure out a timeline that doesn't matter at all in the long run. We made it to this point and we're together, the timeline overlapped in ways that were most likely very complicated.

This time the voices shout and I frown, I don't know what's wrong with me, my ease to be distracted is at a new fucking level. I tune back into what is happening, grateful that despite my distracted wanderings, I only appear to have lost a couple of moments.

“Very well,” the leader grins. “This will be fun, and we'll still get your woman. Maybe we will keep you alive long enough to see what we're going to do to her.”

Before anyone can do or say anything, the leader explodes, actually scratch that, explodes isn't the right word, he fucking vaporizes. My eyes go wide as everybody just stares in shock at the space where the leader once was. It only takes seconds for self-preservation to kick in, and the rest of the locals turn tail and run away. Turning to look at the guys, I try to work out what happened and see all eyes on Reed, his expression is filled with fierce anger, and his power is completely unleashed. he reaches for me and pulls me in close to his side.

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“Well, that’s one way to take care of it,” River says happily, although there is still some tension in his body.

“Let’s head to the cliff. I’m done with this realm,” Raiden says shortly, and starts walking.

The rest of us follow. I stay as close to Reed as he needs me to be, and to be honest, I love any sort of cuddles from the big burly demon. It’s clear that it’s not something that I should ask about, but trying to stop my mouth from asking is taking all of my concentration. After around ten minutes of walking over thankfully fairly flat rock, Reed releases me, moving his arm from around my shoulders to take my hand instead, threading his fingers through mine, he lifts my hand to his mouth and gently kisses the back of it before allowing our joined hands to fall between us.

I melt, there’s no other word for it. That was so fucking cute.

“I think we should pick up the pace,” Raiden says suddenly, a sense of urgency to his tone.

“I agree, but why the sudden need?” Ransom asks curiously.

Raiden frowns, “I thought I recognized those supernaturals, and I’ve been racking my brains trying to think of where I know them from, which realm?”

Griff interrupts him, “Let me guess, it’s somewhere super dangerous, well, more dangerous than we already know it is.”

Raiden nods, “Yeah, pretty much. Let’s just say that if I’m right about the realm that we’re in, then those fire supes that we just met will seem like cuddly kittens.”

“Well shit,” Doc curses.

We all start moving quicker, and I’m pleased that I can keep up with the guys easily.

Wait a minute.

“Are you guys going slower for me?” I ask, as we jump over a thankfully small crack in the rock, and I refuse to look down just in case I see something that I don’t want to.

The guys share a look, even though we’re running.

“Well, yeah, Nene,” Van says.

“I’m fine, we can speed up a bit more, and if I really start to slow you down, just go ahead and I’ll catch up,” I reply.

“I’ll carry you,” Reed says. His voice is so firm that I don’t even bother to try to argue with him.

Plus, I don’t mind being carried, especially not by Reed.

The guys pick up their pace, and they all check on me regularly to make sure that I’m okay and not struggling. They gradually increase the speed, and we’re all shocked when I actually manage to keep pace with them. It’s not easy. My lungs are beginning to burn with the effort, and I know my legs aren’t going to be happy with me later on, but I’m fucking doing it, and that makes any pain that I may feel later on well worth it.

As the light fades even more, instead of getting cooler, which is what I'm used to happening when the evening starts, it starts to get hotter. Oh, I am not a fan of that.

Finally, we reach the bottom of the cliff, and I look up, and up.

"Fucking hell, it's massive," I mutter in awe.

"It's so big it looks like it's leaning over us," Doc agrees. "I mean it looked massive when we were standing at the edge of the woods, but I can't even see the top."

"It's impressive," Ransom agrees.

"Alright, now that we're here, we need to find the cave," Van says with a slight frown, as he looks at all the holes in the cliff wall that are obviously caves.

"Why can't anything be simple?" Reed asks.

"Because this is a trial that's supposed to test us," Raiden points out with a slight smile.

"Oh yeah," Reed retorts with a smile.

"Any ideas on a way to streamline this process?" River asks. "Because looking at the sheer size of it, we could be out here for weeks trying to find the highest cave."

I shake my head, "I have no idea. What's the betting that some of those caves have things living in them, though?"



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Raiden's eyes widen, "Shit. We really need to figure this out."

"I can help," Griff says, a thoughtful look on his face.

"What are you thinking?" Doc asks curiously.

Griff tilts his head up to look at the towering beast of a cliff above us, and then to either side. "Gargoyles can use a sort of echolocation kind of thing, in order to find caves and safe spaces to take shelter, and for a couple of other reasons that I don't have the time to explain right now. It's difficult to explain how it works. But in theory, I should be able to use my magic to find the highest cave."

"Oh yeah, I remember. You used it when we were looking for that vampire hiker that got stuck," River says, and Griff nods.

"In theory?" Ransom asks, picking up on the uncertainty in Griff's voice.

Griff shrugs, "Well, it's used for small areas. Certainly, areas that are a hell of a lot smaller than this is."

"Ah, okay. Well, if you can use your magic to just search it in sections, then that's so much better than us having to find it the other way," Van replies.

Griff nods, "Definitely. Give me a moment and I'll see what I can do."

We all watch curiously, which I'm not sure is helpful, but I, for one, don't want to miss anything. I love watching the guys do their thing, and when Griff transforms

into all of his gargoyle glory, I love it even more. Yeah, nothing short of an apocalyptic event would stop me from watching Griff right now.

Asael is still in my hand, and although I know that I'm going to have to put him away soon since I can't climb a cliff with a sword in one hand, I'm not going to put him away until the last minute. Those fire locals could be gathering more of their people and come back any moment. To be honest, if I were them and I had just seen my leader explode into microscopic bits, I would stay as far away as I possibly could, but they might want to avenge him or something, so we do need to try to do this as quickly as possible.

Griff's magic fills the air and grows stronger than I remember it being. Glancing at the guys and seeing that their expressions match mine, I'm assuming that his level of power is a surprise to them as well.

"Erm," Griff says, sounding slightly confused as he pulls his magic back, but stays in his gargoyle form.

"What's up?" Evander asks somewhat cautiously.

I can't say I blame him, everything is always more complicated than it needs to be, and we tend to end up having to find solutions to complicated problems.

"Nothing, actually, I found the highest cave," Griff replies.

"That's good?" River questions, sounding confused.

Griff nods, "Yeah."

"So why do you look so confused?" I ask.

“I can’t believe it’s in the section that we’re standing near, that’s good luck,” Doc says with a smile when Griff just stands there.

“It isn’t,” Griff replies.

“Alright, man, we’re going to need you to give us more than one-word answers and explain what’s going on with you right now,” Evander says.

“Shit, sorry,” Griff apologizes. “The highest cave isn’t in front of us, it’s about three miles in that direction.”

“Oh, when you said that your gift could cover a small area, I thought you meant like a mile tops,” I reply with interest.

“Yeah, well, that’s why I’m so confused. I should only be able to use it on roughly a mile of space at a time, but somehow my magic spread along the whole expanse of the cliff, and it goes on for thousands of miles, I think it splits the whole of this piece of land, I sensed sea at either end,” Griff explains.

“Wow,” Doc replies. “That kind of range is crazy.”

Griff nods, “Yeah. The more concerning thing is that all of these other caves that we can see, maybe eighty percent of them have something living in them, and big somethings.”

“Fuck,” Ransom mutters.

“Most likely those creatures that I mentioned, the ones that like to come out after it gets dark,” Raiden replies, as he looks up at the worryingly quickly darkening sky.

“Fantastic,” I reply somewhat sarcastically.

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I mean, at this point, I should have guessed that the creatures Raiden warned us about would be living in the caves, because, of course, they would be. Living in the woods that are miles and miles away from this point would have been far too convenient and helpful.

“Come on, let’s get to this cave and get back to the castle. I’m hungry,” Reed says, as he starts to head in the direction that Griff said the cave was.

“I second that,” I reply with a grin.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

Neith

We pick up the pace again and I’m grateful that we stopped for a moment, because I needed that time to catch my breath, but I’m slowing down now, and although the guys aren’t moving at human speeds for me, they have slowed down from what I know that they’re capable of. I’m just grateful that I’m moving faster than a human, if I’m being honest. We get there relatively quickly, but I’m huffing and puffing, and desperately begging my leg not to cramp like it’s threatening.

The guys all look at me concerned, but I wave them off.

“Can you climb up the cliff?” Van asks.

I nod, “Yeah, I’m already feeling better. I’m not used to pushing my body like that. Besides, I love climbing, far more than running. I hate running.”

“Good to know that’s not changed,” Van grins. “Alright, Griff, Reed, I think it’s probably safe to fly now, but take it cautiously, we’ll follow your path up.”

“Got it,” Griff replies. “I’m going to lead you guys in a slightly serpentine route because there are a couple of caves that have those creatures in them, and I want to avoid disturbing them at all costs.”

“Smart,” I reply, and Griff smirks.

Reed and Griff launch themselves into the air and hover close to the edge of the cliff while the others all start to climb. It doesn’t escape my notice that River and Ransom stay on the ground until I have begun to climb. I end up climbing side by side next to Raiden, and over the sound of the growing wind, I can just about hear him muttering under his breath.

“You okay?” I ask as quietly as I can.

He glances over at me and smiles, “Yeah, I’m just annoyed that I can’t do certain things.”

His eyes dart up and focus on Griff and Reed, and I frown slightly before I realize what he’s trying to subtly hint at. He wants to fly, and he can’t, because the Reaper council hasn’t yet summoned him, and we’re hoping that he won’t be summoned for a while. If we renew their interest in him though, he will get put to the top of their list and get summoned the second that we leave the Choosing. There are things that we want to do and make sure that we have in place before Raiden gets called on.

I know that one of the things that Raiden wants to make sure that he does before he gets called is to do some more research into the fact that the current reaper council isn’t actually supposed to be in power. The original council was somehow left behind in Trieneliea, something that a lot of supernaturals who have the memory are

suspicious about. Unfortunately, there is nothing that anyone has been able to do about their suspicions because by the time that everything had calmed down after the mass eviction from Trieneliea, and the gates closing, the new council had gained too much power, and no one was able to go against them.

The fact is that the reapers were in a new realm, one that some had never been to before and they came from a war-torn world, they needed someone to look to for guidance and while tensions were high and emotions were spiraling, the new council stepped up and took the place that the old one left.

If you didn't know anything about the reapers, then I suppose you could argue that they did a noble thing and helped out when it was needed. However, I do know the reapers well enough, and how the council has changed the narrative around the reapers and made them into something to fear is extremely suspicious to me. Plus, one or two council members not making it through, I could maybe believe, all of the original reaper council not coming through the gates before they closed. That screams suspicious to me.

Where it's going to get complicated for Raiden is that his father is on the council and has been from the beginning, from what I can tell. There is no love lost between them, quite the opposite, in fact his dad is an asshole, but he is still Raiden's father and if it turns out that he was a part of doing something abhorrent, then it is going to affect Raiden.

He won't have to deal with any of it alone, we will all be there for him every step of the way, and if they think for one second that they can summon him and we won't come as well, they're in for a shock. Raiden is going to have backup and people who will fight in his corner.

I almost want them to try to treat Raiden like I know they do because I am literally itching to say something. It infuriates me that the only reason that they treat him so

badly, and have treated him so badly for his entire life, is because he is supposedly so weak and therefore a lower tier than they are. It's even more frustrating that we have recently learnt that the old council didn't run things in the same way, and that power levels meant almost nothing.

In fact, thinking about it, the weaker and more boring that he can make himself look now, the better. The more the council members who are no doubt watching the Choosing will think that whatever power surge they felt couldn't possibly have come from Raiden, and was some kind of glitch or something instead. We're not even that sure that they picked up on Raiden's spikes of power anyway, but I think that it would be very unlikely that they haven't. It wasn't just at the house and within Ransom's wards that he set it free, but also in Ireland, he had his wings free then as well.

My hand slips on a piece of loose rock, and it reminds me that I need to be focusing on the here and now instead of worrying about the future. There will be time for that at a later date.

"Are you okay?" Doc asks me with concern as he glances down at me. When he sees that I'm still calm and actually smiling, his concern turns to curiosity: "You really do actually like climbing, don't you?"

I nod, "It's more that I love being high, and climbing is the way to get high."

"Huh, that makes sense," Doc replies, as he hoists himself higher, and I get momentarily distracted by his ass.

"She's always been the same ever since we were kids," Van says with a fond smile. "She used to disappear every now and then, and no one could find her because they were looking in the usual places that kids hide. I quickly learned to look up, she was always in trees or in the rafters. Pretty much anywhere that would make you think,

how the hell did a seven-year-old human get up there?”

I shrug, which isn't very easy while I'm climbing, and probably looks really odd, “It felt safer to me. Whenever I ran away it was always because someone had said something about me being human, or kids were being mean,” I explaining, stopping myself before I mention that it was usually because I wanted to know about my parents and why they abandoned me, that seems a little bit too vulnerable to tell all the supernaturals watching.

“I know Nene,” Van says with understanding. After all, I told him all about it, and he stood up for me many times.



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Of course, as we got older there were the women that decided they hated me because him and I were friends, and women as a general rule can be pretty fucking vicious, siren women go a step beyond that. Fortunately for me, I had grown a pretty strong backbone by that point, and I enjoyed winding them up more than they actually ever upset me.

We carry on climbing as I focus once again. Honestly, my mind is so unfocused today, and I think it's probably tiredness. We've been, go, go, go, and even when we have rested and slept, it hasn't really been resting because we've all been aware that at any moment we could get pulled from our beds.

I'm hoping that it's tiredness and not a new thing that I've got to work around. My brain already throws me enough curveballs, like the lack of a brain-to-mouth filter and rambling.

"How much further?" Doc asks.

Griff is flying just above Doc and Raiden who are climbing just ahead of me, Reed is flying at the same level as I am, and I know that it's because he's worried that I may fall and if he's close enough then he will be able to catch me before I knock anyone else off, or hurt myself.

"It's not too much further," Griff says, really quietly. "We need to remain silent from this moment onwards though. There are a couple of caves nearby with those creatures in them."

No one says anything, instead, we all nod and move forward.

I absolutely do not want to risk waking creatures that are even more of a threat than the fire locals that we ran into. Reed may have been able to vaporize one of them, but who knows if he can do it again? It took a hell of a lot of power to do that, and it's quite likely that he doesn't have enough left to do it again.

Raiden referred to them as creatures and not supernaturals, which means that they will be more feral and wild. Meaning that they will be more likely to eat us first than they will want to talk about it, if they even can talk, which is unlikely.

Climbing quicker, thoughts of the kinds of creatures that could be lurking in the caves around us fill my mind. My imagination has always been extremely vivid, and although my depiction of what I think they look like is probably a lot more gruesome than they really are, just in case it's true, or the reality is worse, I decide not to ask Raiden what these creatures look like until we're back at the castle or maybe even back home.

Not that I can ask him now anyway, because we're supposed to be being quiet, I remind myself firmly. Finally, Griff makes a gesture that we're close to the highest cave entrance where we are supposed to put the gemstone, and he and Reed fly up together to check it out and see if there is anything that we need to be concerned about inside.

You know, like those creatures.

Griff's magic grows, and I know that he's using his echolocation thing. He doesn't seem too concerned, judging from his expression, but he and Reed still cautiously enter the cave just to make sure that there is nothing lurking in there, as the rest of us continue to climb. I must admit that my arms are starting to get tired now, and if I can walk tomorrow, after all of the running and climbing that I've done, I will be very surprised. I did bring some of my favorite healing herbs that go into a warm bath and help to gently heal and ease sore muscles.

I frown slightly. I hope I've got enough for everyone.

Griff and Reed give us the all clear, and Doc and Van disappear over the edge of the cave and then reach down for me, hauling me over the edge with ease.

Once we're all inside and relatively safe, I take a look around. The cave is pretty big, and there's more than enough space for us to move around. The view out across the rocky terrain and the forest is absolutely amazing, and the forest is so vast that I can't see anything else beyond it. What I do see is the sun dipping ever closer behind the horizon, and a sense of urgency hits me. We need to get out of here as quickly as we can.

Turning back to face the cave, I spot a plinth tucked away at the back, looking pretty unassuming. There is nowhere else that we could put the gemstone, and nothing has popped up to say put it here.

I mean, it would be helpful if there were a neon sign or something that would tell us exactly where to put it and what our next step is. But then again, I suppose if there were, the Choosing would be far too easy and not the challenge that it's meant to be. I keep forgetting that the Choosing was intended for the warriors that trained in the realms and at the training academy in Trieneliea, the one that Kyrour led.

It wasn't only meant to help deal with disputes about team members, which makes sense if you really think about it, because it's not a simple or easy thing to go through.

"We can talk, but very quietly," Griff says, barely above a whisper.

"Have you got the gem?" I ask, and then add, "Where the hell have you put it? None of us has bags."

Ransom chuckles and holds his hand out, sitting in his hand is the giant gemstone, and I roll my eyes at myself. Duh, of course they used magic to hide it and make it easier to carry. River must have handed it to him at some point. I can't believe I missed them doing it, actually. They had to have done it when we were still in the woods, or I think those local supernaturals would have spotted it.

"Magic," Ransom grins.

I chuckle, "I am aware that the answer seems obvious now."

"It's been a long day," Doc says, pulling me under his arm and dropping a kiss on the top of my head.

They're all so free with their affection for me that it just seems to come naturally, and I think any hope that we had that people wouldn't think that there was something going on between us, is pretty much shot to shit. I don't really care though.

The more I think about it, the more I think it makes more sense to have them focus on that, than it does to have them focusing on all the things that the guys can do that they shouldn't be able to do.

"I'm going to assume that the gemstone goes on the plinth?" Reed questions as he points to it.

River shrugs, "All the instructions said was to bring it to the cave, since the portal didn't immediately appear when we got here, we must have to do something to trigger it and officially finish this task."

"And we need to do it before the sun goes down completely and we end up being attacked by the things in the caves around us," Griff reminds us.

“Good point,” Raiden agrees.

Van shrugs, “Let’s put it on the plinth and see what happens. There doesn’t seem to be anywhere else obvious for it to go.”

Ransom nods and walks over to the plinth, he places the gemstone on top, and it glows brightly. For a brief moment, I feel the tug of the portal, but then it disappears.

“What happened?” I ask the guys, we’re all still in the cave.

“I have no idea,” Reed answers as he looks around in confusion.

River does not look impressed as he says, “I thought I felt the portal, but it wasn’t as strong as it usually is.”

“Same,” Doc replies.

“Do you feel that?” Ransom asks.

Van nods, “Yeah, the magic is building again.”

“It feels different though?” Raiden says it like a question.

I nod, “Yeah, but I can’t put my finger on why.”

We don’t have any more time to try and figure out what’s going on because the portal magic suddenly appears again, but instead of pulling us in, the Draconian team

suddenly appears, all of them looking sleepy and disoriented, apart from Coen, who spots us immediately. His eyes light up, but his expression remains in a frown.

The effort that it takes me to not run to him immediately is so fucking difficult that I find myself clenching my hands at my sides.

“What the fuck are we doing here?” Kylen demands.

“The gemstone has gone,” River points out, completely ignoring Kylen.

However, my eyes are glued to his face, across his cheek is a bright red, and blistering handprint, about the same size as Ribit’s hand.

I burst out laughing, “Looking good.”

“Fuck you, cunt,” Kylen immediately retorts.

Growls of warning fill the cave, and my smile widens as Kylen immediately shrinks back, before pretending that he’s not scared at all. Even the rest of the team looks nervous as they stay silent and watch us with caution. Although a couple of them seem to have learned from their mistakes at the first task and are dressed, Kylen and Rupert aren’t, and are in pyjamas, although they do appear to have boots on, which is weird. Then again, I think that the whole team is a bit off. I mean, how does it make sense to wear pyjamas, but put boots on just in case?

Especially after they have already been caught out.

It’s stupid.

My eyes involuntarily drift back to Coen, I can’t fucking help it. His eyes briefly meet mine, and his jaw clenches tightly as he looks away. He’s finding this just as

difficult as I am, but it really is safer.

For him and me.

The same glow of magic that appeared in the woods shows up again, and Evander reads the words as they appear.

“Head north, work together to get through the portal, everyone must go through the portal to pass the trial,” Van reads.

“North?” one of the Draconian team asks.

I still don’t know all of their names, and I have no desire to learn them.

More words appear and Van reads them aloud as they do, “Certain gifts and attributes of your supernatural sides will be suppressed from this point forward.”

I frown, and I’m not the only one as my guys all share a look and Coen looks completely unfazed since I am pretty sure that his magic has been suppressed for years, that’s the only thing that would explain why he can’t shift.

Doc is the first to speak, “Fuck. That’s not good.”

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“It could have at least told us what parts of our supernaturals are going to be suppressed, at least then we would know what we’re working with and have an idea of how to get around it,” the Draconian member that we met in the search for Coen a few days ago says.

### Chapter Twenty-Four

Neith

One of the other members glares at me, “It’s her fault. She’s human, so the Choosing is trying to make it even. We’re all going to get killed because of her.”

“Shut the fuck up, Jamie,” Coen snaps. “If you can’t keep up with a measly human then you deserve to fucking die.”

Jamie puffs up and takes a step forward, “You want to say that again?”

Coen’s smile is sharp, deadly, and his eyes light with violence. Before he can say a single word though Rupert does, “That’s enough. Jamie, Coen’s fucking right, she’s stayed alive this far, if you can’t without one of your gifts or abilities you deserve to fucking die.”

My eyebrows rise, and so do Coen’s. We aren’t the only ones who look surprised. That was almost a compliment from him. Kylen seems to have noticed as well and narrows his eyes at Rupert. Rupert clearly notices, but is choosing to ignore it.

“We can figure out what our limitations are, it’s the Choosing; it’s supposed to be



difficult, and cutting us off from something that we are used to relying on is a good test of that,” Ransom points out.

“Where the hell are we anyway?” Rupert asks.

I grin and point to the cave entrance, “Go and take a look.”

He narrows his eyes at me, but clearly curiosity wins over suspicion because he and Kylen both head to the cave entrance. There is just enough light left that they should be able to get the full effect of the view and, more importantly, the situation.

“Shit, we’re really fucking high up,” Rupert says with a slight grimace that strikes me as odd because he’s a dragon and flies, so he should be used to heights.

“North is up further,” Ransom says with a slight frown. “We’re going to have to climb to the top, and there’s no way of knowing what’s up there.”

“Let’s get going then, I don’t want to be here with you fuckers any longer than I have to be,” Kylen says as he steps closer to the edge.

“We aren’t going anywhere until the sun comes back up,” Raiden starts.

Kylen sneers at Raiden, “Don’t tell me what to do, you filthy reaper.”

“Watch it,” River growls.

Raiden just rolls his eyes, “If you want to get torn to shreds and slowly eaten as the creatures keep you alive until you’re nothing but bones,” he gestures toward the cave entrance, “then sure, go ahead and leave.”

“The instructions clearly said that we needed to work together,” Griff points out, “I

think splitting up in the first five minutes and then getting eaten isn't going to help us pass this task and get back to the castle with all of us alive."

Rupert immediately comes away from the edge of the cave and moves to stand back with the rest of the team. Kylen takes one last look out of the cave entrance and teeters on the edge, as if he is tempted to call our bluff. As he stands there, the sun finally sets, and night falls completely. Like a switch has been flicked, there is suddenly a terrifying screech that fills the air. One is quickly joined by another, as the creatures that Raiden warned us about wake up. A huge prehistoric-looking creature, with glowing red eyes and a thin pointed tail, suddenly appears at the entrance to the cave. It's so big that it throws the entire place into darkness, and fear spears me at the sight of its two heads, and humanlike arms tipped with deadly sharp claws.

"Kylen!" Rupert calls out urgently, "Get the fuck away from the entrance!"

Kylen doesn't move; he doesn't even twitch as he stares at the creature.

"Shit," Raidne curses. "These creatures have the ability to freeze you in your place. I don't think he can move."

Before any of us can react to Raiden's explanation, the creature screeches again and its tail whips out and wraps around Kylen's leg. I have to admit there is a moment in time where I consider just letting him get eaten, but then I remember that we don't know if we need Kylen alive in order to break the control he has over Coen, and that the instructions from the Choosing said that we had to help each other and get to the portal together.

Oh, and murders bad blah blah blah.

Is it technically murder if I just watch it happen and don't help?

Looking at Kylen's team it's clear that none of them are going to do anything to help, they're all as far back in the cave as they can possibly get and make no signs to move.

Coen rolls his eyes, "For fuck sake."

He strides forward, moving toward Kylen to help him. That's enough to spur the rest of us into motion. We're all perfectly fine with letting Kylen get hurt before we rescue him since he is such a monumental asshole, but not Coen, he's ours.

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Coen slices at the creature's tail with his sword, as Reed stops it from attacking Coen while he slices the tail. Evander starts to blast water in its face, hoping to force it to let go and move backward away from the cave entrance. The creature yowls in pain as its skin hisses where the water comes in contact, but it still doesn't let go. It tugs, and Kylen moves closer to the edge. River grabs hold of one of Kylen's arms, Raiden grabs hold of the other, and I pull Asael from my back.

"Move," I say to Coen.

It's a testament to how we've worked together before that he doesn't question me, he just moves. I swing Asael, and he slices through the creature's tail with ease, causing the creature to scream and launch itself backward. There is no time to breathe a breath of relief though because as soon as the creature drops out of sight another one takes its place.

River and Raiden pull Kylen back further into the cave as Van, Reed, Coen, and Doc, who had been helping them keep the head busy, jump back to avoid the new tail that's threatening to grab hold of anything that it can. Ransom steps forward and throws his hands up; the now familiar glow of one of his wards blocks the entrance completely. He's left it so that we can see through it, and I move up to his side as I stare out at the hundreds of creatures flying around in the night sky, only illuminated by the moonlight.

"Fucking hell," I mutter. "They're swarming like bats."

Kylen starts to curse and grumble, spouting a whole load of bullshit about how he had it and didn't need any help. Everyone ignores him, even the Draconian team, as they

all edge closer to see the swarming mass outside. One of the creatures dives toward the ward and then bounces off with a pain filled screech, as another tries to do the same.

They don't seem to be that intelligent, these creatures.

"We stay in the cave tonight, and move when it's light," Evander says firmly, and no one, not even Kylen, tries to argue with him.

"The ward will last until then, but I'm going to have to stay awake to maintain it," Ransom says. "Especially since they are attacking it. I need to make sure that they don't make any weak spots."

Van nods, "That's fine, we'll take it in shifts to wait with you, and as soon as the first light hits and they disappear, you can get a couple of hours' sleep before we head out."

"I don't fucking think so, we will be leaving at first light," Kylen starts.

"No," Reed replies. His voice commanding, and all of the Draconian team hit the floor. Coen falls a moment later than everyone else and lands a lot more comfortably. Reed continues, "Ransom is staying up all night to keep us all safe, we will not be leaving until he has caught up on at least a couple of hours of sleep, so he isn't putting himself at risk."

"Need we remind you, again," River growls, "we have to help each other and get through this together."

"Trust us, we hate it as much as you fucking do," Griff adds.

Reed's power retracts, and everyone slowly sits up, all of them looking nervously at

him.

Kylen clears his throat, anger and malice dancing across his expression, “Fine. But don’t expect any of us to help keep watch.”

I roll my eyes, fucking pathetic.

None of us bother to reply because honestly, what is the point. The Draconian team all head to the very back of the cave and settle down. Coen reluctantly sits down near them, but right on the very edge. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised when they all start to make beds and close their eyes, but I can’t believe that they aren’t even going to try to help. Especially since we saved their leader, and thanks to Ransom, we’re ensuring that they don’t end up dying in the night.

Van sighs and pinches his nose, “Alright, guys. I’ll be on watch first with Ransom, and then we’ll rotate through the night. We can switch every hour or so, and someone needs to be watching when Ransom goes down as well, just in case.”

“Agreed,” Doc says. “There’s always a chance that one of them could stay awake or something else could become a threat.”

“Exactly,” Van agrees. He looks at Ransom apologetically, “I’m sorry, man, but I’m only going to be able to give you a couple of hours’ sleep. We have no idea what is over the top of the cliff, and we can’t risk leaving it too late to find shelter if we need to before it gets dark again. I have a feeling that those creatures hunt for miles around.”

Raiden nods, “From what I can remember, they do. They have huge appetites, so their hunting grounds are vast. I think the realm goes into lockdown at night.”

Van grimaces, “That’s going to make things a lot more difficult. It means that we

can't travel when it gets dark, and although it seems to stay light for a while, the creatures seem to wake up suddenly when it does."

"It means that we might have to find shelter again before we can get to the portal," Griff points out gruffly, his arms crossed over his chest.

"The instructions from the Choosing didn't mention a time frame," Coen interrupts, proving that he's listening, and earning a scathing look from Kylen, which he ignores as he continues, "so at least there's that. Not that it would be ideal to have to find shelter and stay here for another night."

Doc nods, "That's a really good point. Although I don't like the thought of us not having a time frame because it's so difficult that we don't need the added pressure of a time limit, too."

"It's okay, we'll figure it out. We have enough skills between us, even if we are missing something," Ransom replies. "I'm good with only getting a couple of hours of sleep, I'm feeling pretty revitalized after earlier anyway, a good fight always does that to me."

I begin to frown and then realize that he's talking about the magic that I lent him when he was bringing Griff and Reed in to avoid the lava geysers.

"Good," Evander says without skipping a beat. He turns to the rest of us, "Everyone else needs to get some sleep. Griff, I will wake you in an hour."

Everyone nods, and he looks pointedly at the guys. I'm unsure what the look means until I find myself lying between Reed and Griff, with River lying above my head, and Doc at my feet. Not only that, but they have made sure that we're lying on the side of the cave, which also puts Coen between us and the rest of the Draconian team.

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I am surrounded and literally protected on all sides, and despite the situation that we find ourselves in, I feel safe. I know that the guys won't let something happen to me.

The Draconian team is already snoring apart from Coen, who is still sitting up with his back against the cave wall and looking at the pile that the rest of us are in with longing.

I don't need to gain his attention since he's already looking at me, so I mouth the words, "Get some sleep."

It's a risk, the cameras could catch it, but quite frankly, in this moment, I don't care.

Coen shakes his head, and I frown as shadows cross his features. I don't like that, I don't like it at all. What I dislike even more is that there is fuck all that I can do about it right now, so instead, I tap my hand on my stomach as nonchalantly as I can and once I know he's looking, I tap the sign, our sign, Coen and Dimitri's.

For the second time today.

Coen's eyes fill with emotions, but he looks away. Sitting up, he pulls out one of his blades and his sharpening stone that he always carries with him, and starts to sharpen his blade. As I'm about to look away, he taps the reply. His reply always involved his knife because he always had one in his hand, just like Dimitri's reply always involved his sword. It was his favorite weapon.

I try not to smile, as I look away, and I catch Doc's eyes, he looks at me curiously, clearly having picked up on the exchange. Smiling, I nudge him gently with my foot,



and he grins, moving his hand so that it's resting on my leg.

"Get some sleep," he mutters quietly. It's not what he wants to ask, but he can't exactly ask that question right now.

I nod and settle down, closing my eyes. I'm grateful that I'm surrounded by my men, my head on River's stomach, so that I can see Raiden and Evander sitting by the entrance to the cave and talking quietly. I can't help but wish that Coen were over here with us, but he's closer than he has been for a long time, and I'm grateful for that.

Sleep is not going to come easy for me. We're in an unfamiliar place, the enemy is nearby, we're in danger, and thanks to the guys spoiling me, I am now not nearly as good at suppressing my hunger as I used to be.

It's been a long time since I fell asleep on an empty stomach, and the thought makes me smile.

We may be in an unfamiliar place, but unlike when I have been in this kind of situation in the past, the most recent past anyway, I'm not having to handle it alone, and that makes a massive difference.

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Someone is watching me, I can feel it. The voices are muttering in warning and have woken me up ever so carefully, so I don't jump. It doesn't feel like good attention, and the longer I keep my eyes closed, the more scared I am about what is watching me while I sleep. I haven't been asleep for that long, I know that much, because I'm still really tired.

The voices rise again, and I force my eyes open.

“What the fuck!” I yell, waking everyone else up in the process.

Kylen is standing near where Doc was lying by my feet, leaning over him with his eyes locked on me and his hand reaching for me, his expression filled with hatred and malice.

My scream has all of the guys up and on guard. Doc’s hand snaps out and grabs Kylen’s ankle with such force that he snaps it in two. He ignores Kylen’s scream of pain as he launches to his feet, pulling Kylen down as Doc’s fist aims for Kylen’s face, and Kylen starts to fight back. River pulls me behind him, backing me up against the wall as he lets out a terrifying growl and shifts into his kitsune form.

My heart is beating a mile a minute, and I can’t do anything but watch the chaos in front of me unfold. Feeling so much safer with River’s giant kitsune form in front of me, I thread my shaking hands into his soft fur. He must feel them shake because he lets out another terrifying growl.

The guys move to hold back the Draconian team as Doc and Kylen carry on fighting for a few more minutes before Doc has Kylen pinned beneath him.

“You can’t kill him,” Coen says, and I know that it’s for Doc’s benefit and not Kylen’s.

“He’s right, man,” Reed reluctantly agrees.

Doc doesn’t move his hands wrapped around Kylen’s throat as Kylen struggles uselessly beneath him, and slowly starts to turn purple.

“Camden!” I yell. “I’m good, you taught him a lesson. I need you over here.”

Doc glances over at me, his golden eyes scanning me, and I know that he’s checking

for injuries. When he doesn't find any, he releases a now passed out Kylen.

Standing up, he throws him at the feet of the Draconian team, "If he comes near Neith again, I will kill him."

Rupert nods, seeing the seriousness on Doc's face. "Understood."

Coen stays glued to the spot, his eyes on me, and I know that he wants to come over here and make sure that I'm okay. He can't risk it though. Lifting my hand from River's fur, I tap out the sign to say that I'm okay. Coen's eyes narrow, but Rupert calls for him to help move Kylen, and he reluctantly turns around. The guys all gather around me.

"Are you okay?" Van asks. Unable to get any closer to me because River is still in protection mode. Van glances down at him, his eyes widening, "Fuck, Neith don't let go of him, you are the only thing keeping him calm right now, and stopping him from killing Kylen."

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I nod, “I don’t plan on letting go any time soon. I’m okay, just a little bit freaked out.”

“That’s understandable,” Raiden growls.

“We really should try and get some sleep now,” I say with a frown. “We have a busy day tomorrow. Not that I know how I’m going to get some sleep.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep watch. One of those creatures attacked at the same time that Kysten decided to stand over you guys,” Ransom says.

“It’s my turn to keep watch with you. Whoever is up with you can make sure nothing like that happens again,” Griff says gruffly, his eyes full of anger.

I nod, “Okay.”

Sliding down the wall, I stay sitting as River lies in front of me, my fingers still in his fur, and the others sit as close as they can around me. Doc’s hand rests on my thigh, and Evander’s does the same on the other side, and Raiden sits next to River, resting his on his back as he takes one of my hands in his, leaving my other one to carry on holding on to River

“Try and get some sleep,” Van says. “We’re here.”

“Don’t forget to wake me for my shift,” I say. When the guys share a look, I roll my eyes and add, “I mean it.”

“Okay, deal,” Reed replies for everyone.

The cave falls silent as everyone tries to settle down again, and sleep is hard fought for.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Neith

“Neith,” Raiden says gently.

My eyes immediately ping open, “I’m up.”

“Shit me that was fucking terrifying,” Raiden replies, looking slightly shocked.

I chuckle as I sit up, “Sorry, I wake up easily when I’m in this kind of situation, and especially after last night.”

Raiden’s eyes narrow, but he doesn’t comment purely because this is the Choosing and we’re being watched. I’m getting so fed up with thinking that, but I feel like if I don’t remind myself regularly, I’m going to forget, and there would be some pretty big consequences if I forgot. Ones that I don’t want to deal with.

To be honest, I’m good with that because I absolutely don’t want to relive the events of last night. I can’t believe I managed to get back to sleep afterthat. Although granted, I did fall asleep sitting up with my back against the wall, River’s giant kitsunefront of me, Doc on one side, and Reed on the other, with the other guys all around me and closely packed together. The Draconian team clearly took Doc’s threat seriously because they put Kylen as far away from me as possible, and then put themselves between us, with Coen the closest to us. His eyes glued to me, and murderously angry.

“It’s nearly morning, you’re the last one to do a shift. As soon as the light comes up, send Ransom to lie down, and wake the rest of us,” he says instead, and I nod as I get up and carefully step over a sleeping Evander.

The men are all in different places than they were when I went to sleep, having switched as they did their shifts, but they’re all still around me and keeping me safe.

When I glance over at the door to the cave, I’m surprised to see Coen sitting next to Ransom, looking far more relaxed than he has been for a while.

“Hey,” I say as I sit down on the other side of Ransom.

Ransom grins, looking surprisingly awake considering the time and how long he has been awake for, although his grin is interrupted by a huge yawn.

“Coen decided to keep me company, he’s been here since Kylen pulled that creepy as fuck shit,” Ransom tells me with a smile.

I smile and open my mouth to say thank you, when I realize that it means that he’s been up all night and hasn’t gotten any sleep. I study Coen as my eyes narrow.

He deliberately avoids my gaze, which has Ransom hiding a smirk behind his hand.

“Shouldn’t you get some sleep?” I ask him.

Coen pulls a face, “Nah, I’m good.”

He smirks, he knows that I can’t say anything else without giving anything away. Which pretty much means that I can’t make him get some sleep or chew him out for not getting any sleep like I usually would do.

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It does occur to me that there is probably a reason why he won't go to sleep, other than the fact that he wants to make sure that Kylen doesn't pull any creepy shit again.

"So, did anything interesting happen while I was asleep?" I ask, as I look out into the night.

"You snore," Coen mutters, a familiar argument that brings an instant grin to his face.

Indignation lights my tone, "I do not."

Ransom chuckles, "Yeah, you do. But River snores louder."

I huff and then end up chuckling quietly and decide to change the subject instead of carrying on this argument, which in past experience has ended up lasting quite a while. "What about the creatures?"

"They keep trying to attack every now and then, but the ward is holding strong, and it's only one or two that are trying. The majority of them are out hunting, I would assume," Ransom replies.

"Well, at least that's something," I reply.

"That mark on Kylen's face is really something, huh?" Coen asks after a moment of silence.

I try not to let my surprise at his words show in my expression.

Ransom nods, “Yeah. It’s pretty nasty. It will keep burning too until the spirit that inflicted it takes it back. He must have pissed off a pretty fucking powerful spirit.”

I don’t say anything as I continue to stare out of the cave entrance as the sky slowly begins to lighten. They definitely did that on purpose, giving me information that they both knew that I would be curious about, albeit in a slightly out of the blue way. I had sort of guessed that Ribit had done it, I had no idea that it had the effects that it does, and I can’t help but smile that the handprint is going to cause him so grief.

I’m going to give her the biggest hug when I see her next.

We all sit in companionable silence, although there is so much that I want to say, and quite honestly, I would much rather be sitting between them rather than at the end.

“I should probably get some sleep,” Coen mutters as he gets up and stretches. He nods at both of us and then heads back to where he was when I first fell asleep, lying down and facing the other way.

“Did any of the Draconian team come and help keep watch apart from Coen?” I ask Ransom after a moment.

Ransom shakes his head, “Nope, none of them have even stirred. I don’t understand how they are SID agents. They’re lazy, combative, and refuse to work as part of a team.”

I frown, “I have a feeling that today is going to be interesting, to say the least. They’re going to have to chip in at some point. That was the instruction, and more than that, if they aren’t putting any effort into keeping themselves alive, I won’t either.”

Ransom chuckles, “Well said. I think that’s a fair enough assessment. Although the



instructions also said that we all had to get through the portal alive. I get the feeling that Coen is going to carry the weight of the team.”

I frown, we know that they’re a problem, and we know that Coen gets treated like shit. In the last trial that I did with them, I was too busy trying to stay alive to witness much of the way that they interacted. I haven’t even seen them together for that long, since the majority of them have been asleep, but what I have seen has pissed me off.

If I make it through today without punching one of them in the face for the way that they talk to and treat Coen, I will be incredibly surprised. I’m going to have to be really careful, because if I do react to something that strongly, then Kylan is going to realize that I know Coen or at least suspect something is going on.

I absolutely don’t want that to happen. Kylan will use it against Coen, and I won’t allow that.

It’s getting closer and closer to sunrise, and as it does, more of the creatures are returning to their caves. They’re flying a lot slower than they were when they first woke up, and although a couple of them glance at our cave, they clearly don’t think that it’s worth trying to attack us as they all fly into the cliffside. The higher that the sun rises, the fewer of the creatures we see until we don’t see any at all.

“The sun is almost up,” I point out after a moment of silence. “You should get some sleep while you can.”

Ransom sighs and nods as he watches the sun crest the horizon. “I am pretty sure that they have all gone back now. I’ll wake Doc up. He can keep watch with you until everyone else gets up.”

I nod, “Okay, sounds good to me.”

He stands up and then leans back over, dropping a kiss on top of my head, without even thinking about it. I smile up at him as his eyes widen slightly when he realizes what he's just done. To be honest, the guys have all kissed my head or the back of my hand by this point, and I really don't think that it matters. People will think what people are going to think, and like I decided yesterday, it may distract them from some of the other things that we do need to hide.

Ransom clearly thinks the same thing because he shrugs and smiles sleepily at me.

"Go and get some sleep," I order when a blink lasts just a bit too long to be considered a blink.

"Yes, ma'am," he grins, lazily saluting me and then heads to the guys.

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When he tries to wake Doc up, several of the others wake up as well, apart from Raiden, who has only just gone to sleep. Van comes and sits next to me, nudging my shoulder with his as he looks out over the incredible view and the sun rising higher.

It only takes a couple of minutes before the golden ward that has kept us safe all night drops, and I smile as I realize that it must mean that Ransom has fallen asleep.

It's clear when the ward drops that it's not the only job that it was doing, and the warmth from outside smacks me in the face. Considering that I noticed last night that it got hotter as the sun went down, rather than cooler, I think Ransom's shield saved us from sweating buckets last night and not being able to get the rest that we needed to get.

"Are you okay?" Van asks me.

I nod, "Yeah, I'm good. You?"

Van grins, "I'm ready for this trial to be over. I wonder why Mabel didn't warn us that there could be a task that we would all have to do together."

"Maybe, there isn't supposed to be," I mutter as the wheels in my head begin to turn. "I mean, we passed the task together, and then the other team turned up. This is the last day of trials, so technically, that would make it the Draconians' team trial. Maybe there was a glitch that meant you guys didn't go home, or maybe there was another reason why the Choosing decided to put both of the teams together."

I don't want to say it out loud, but I'm really hoping that Van is following my thought

process.

It takes him a moment, but to be fair, he has only just woken up. I know he is on the same wavelength as I am when his eyes widen slightly and his head tilts to the side curiously.

“You know what, Nene, I bet you’re right,” Van replies carefully. “Although that also suggests that we were right, and that’s a concern.”

I nod in agreement. There isn’t much else that I can do. If I’m right and the Choosing has kept my team here because the Draconian team is actually trying to kill me, like we have discussed before, then that means that an entity that is stronger and more powerful than all of us, is in agreement and possibly knows more than we do.

That’s concerning, to say the least.

I am very grateful that I have the guys with me, and that because of that, Kylen is hopefully smart enough not to try anything. Although whatever he was trying to do last night when the voices woke me may beg to differ with that theory. He did get pretty badly beaten by Doc, which I would hope would have put him off from trying anything else. I hope he realizes that the only reason why he isn’t dead is because we all have to finish this trial alive, and I managed to get through to Doc.

The rest of the team quickly join us, and we talk quietly as we wait for Ransom to get enough sleep. My thoughts earlier about the heat have proven to be correct, as it starts to get cooler as the sun rises higher in the sky. Relief fills me. I have no idea how far we have to travel to make it to the portal that will take us home, but I am very glad that we won’t have to do it in the heat.

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We manage to allow Ransom to get around three hours of sleep before Van reluctantly decides that we really can't let him sleep for much longer, and we need to get going.

He looks at the Draconian team as he gets up to wake Ransom, "You need to wake Kylen, or we'll leave him here. His leg will be healed by now, there's no reason for him to be still sleeping."

Rupert glares but moves over to Kylen to wake him up, while Van moves over to Ransom. As soon as Evander says his name, Ransom wakes and sits up to stretch, running his hand through his hair and gathering himself.

Kylen, on the other hand, has to be repeatedly shouted at and then kicked by Rupert, which I find way too amusing.

"I'm tired," Kylen grumbles as he turns over, ready to go back to sleep.

"Get the fuck up, you lazy asshole," River snaps. "You've slept all night, not helping to keep watch, and Ransom, who is responsible for making sure that we were safe, has only had three hours' sleep and is up and ready to leave."

"We're more than happy to leave you here," Evander adds. "Trial be fucking damned, you're lucky you're fucking alive as it is."

Kylen turns around, his eyes filling with fire as the handprint on his face looks even worse than it did yesterday. It looks really painful, and if it were on anyone else I would be feeling sorry for them, but it's on Kylen and after last night, I really couldn't give a shit, not that I really did in the first place come to think of it.

Everyone, even his own team, ignore him as he starts bitching and whining, at least he's getting up.

“Alright, let’s head out,” Van says, taking charge. “The instructions said north, and that’s up.”

I’m surprised when no one argues with him, not that there is anything to really argue with. It’s a fact. It really is as simple as that. Hey, that rhymed, I’m a poet and I didn’t know it. I chuckle quietly and earn weird looks from everyone close enough to hear me in the process, which I decide to ignore because explaining what I’m laughing about will just make them give me even more weird looks.

We all start to climb out of the cliff entrance, and I grin as a breeze helps to cool what was left of the balmy night. Only River, Doc, and one of the Draconian team are out there when Griff grunts.

“I think I’ve figured out what I’ve lost,” Griff announces, loudly enough that everyone can hear him.

“What?” Reed asks.

“Wings,” Griff replies. “I just tried to shift, and I can, but my wings don’t appear.”

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“Let me try,” Reed says, and I watch curiously. He shakes his head, “Nope, I don’t have access to my wings either.”

“What about you guys?” Doc asks, looking at Rupert and Kylen. They’re the only dragons on the team apart from Coen, and we all know that he can’t shift.

I’m assuming that since Doc didn’t ask the other one, Jamie, I think he’s called, and that the last member is already out on the cliffside, that neither of them has wings.

“We don’t have to tell you fuck all,” Kylen starts.

Rupert rolls his eyes, and then looks like he’s concentrating before he shakes his head, “No, I can’t. Obviously, I can’t fully shift into my dragon in here, but when I called on my magic, I could feel that my wings wouldn’t transform.”

“So those of us who can fly have lost the ability to do so,” Griff says, with a slight frown.

“Well, that can’t be good,” I mutter.

After discussing the implications for a moment longer, it’s decided that there isn’t anything that we can do, and we were warned that we would lose parts of our gifts, so we’re going to have to work around it. We decide to carry on with the initial plan and get to the top of the cliff. We have no idea what’s waiting up there for us, and we need to get up there as quickly as we can so that we can assess the situation.

It shouldn’t be a big deal that some of them don’t have access to their wings

anymore, since the rest of us do pretty well without wings.

As I climb, I can't help but think that the Choosing has taken away their wings for a reason. I mean, obviously it has, but I'm going to assume that it's taking them away because we're going to need them. I also wonder if anyone else has lost any of their magic or gifts, or if it's just those that have wings. I guess we're going to find out.

When Reed pulls me up and over the top of the cliff, I have to say I'm surprised at what I see. I thought there might be more forest, or even more of the rocky terrain from below up here, but instead, there's just a huge expanse of pasture—mostly flat, all grass, except for a couple of trees dotted here and there.

It's pretty.

Most surprisingly though is that I can see the portal in the distance. I have a feeling that it's actually a lot further away than it looks, and I also have a feeling that it's not as easy to get to as it looks either. It wouldn't be much of a task if all we had to do were climb up the cliff and walk leisurely toward the portal.

The others are all quickly over the edge, and looking around just like I am, with the same amount of caution as well.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Neith

"I think this is deceiving," River mutters, echoing my thoughts.

"Oh absolutely," the Draconian member whose name I don't know replies, earning a glare from Kylen simply because he's agreeing with River, which is the most ridiculous thing that I have seen for a while. It's like Kylen hasn't left high school let



alone fucking college.

“It can’t be this easy,” Raiden adds, as his gaze narrows on our surroundings.

Griff nods, “It’s most likely not, but we’ve got no choice but to go forward. It’s how we get out of here.”

“Griff’s right,” Evander agrees, once again taking a leadership role. “We need to move forward as quickly and safely as possible. There are no places up here for us to take shelter from the creatures if we’re still up here by nightfall.”

Rupert frowns, “It doesn’t look too far away.”

Jamie is the one who replies, “I think that might be an illusion.”

“Agreed,” Ransom says. “If the worst comes to the worst and we end up being exposed when night falls, my magic should have replenished enough by then that I should be able to put the ward around us as we move, I’m exhausted from holding it all night and not getting much sleep, so I have no idea how long I’ll be able to keep it up for. If it happens any sooner than nightfall though I won’t be able to hold it, I couldn’t do it right now. Especially, since it’s likely that since we’re exposed, the creatures are going to be attacking relentlessly.”

“That’s understandable,” Van agrees. “We’ll just hope that we get there before nightfall. If needs must, then we will have to fight our way through if your magic hasn’t replenished itself yet. We don’t want you to be using your magic at dangerously low levels.” He looks around at everyone, “Let’s go.”

“Who do you think you are telling my team and me what to do?” Kylen suddenly says.

Van raises his eyebrow, “Do you have another idea or plan?”

Kylen scowls and stays silent, and I frown. As they begin to go back and forth, I lean closer to Doc, and saying as quietly as I can, I ask, “Is it me, or is he slightly more unhinged than usual?”

Doc nods, “I did think that, especially after what he did last night, he can’t have thought that would have ended any differently, but to be honest, it could just be because of the pain he’s in from the mark on his cheek. There have been many stories where people have gone insane because of a ghost mark.”

My eyes widen, “Really?”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:48 am*

Doc nods as we hang out at the back of the group while everyone starts walking. I'm keeping one eye and ear on our surroundings, but I'm also incredibly curious about ghost marks and what exactly Ribit did to him. It seems that it's more complicated than I originally thought it was.

Keeping his voice low, although Kylan is still bitching loudly so there's no chance that he will hear us anyway, Doc explains, "Yeah. There has been extensive research into it and how to treat it effectively, but because it's from beyond the veil, nothing works. We've even had necromancers, reapers, and other creatures who deal with the spirit realm, see if they can help in any way, but ghost marks are resistant to everything that we have come up with so far, and we've been trying for centuries now."

"Holy crap that's pretty insane," I mutter.

"Yeah, it is, and whatever ghost put that on him must have been a pretty powerful witch or warlock when they were alive," he adds. "I haven't seen one that bad for a long time."

"Well damn," I reply.

We fall silent as we carry on walking, and I become increasingly uncomfortable with how exposed we are. Looking on the positive side though, anything that tries to attack us will also be exposed. So I guess there's that at least.

We've been walking for a while, and the portal doesn't look like it's getting any closer, as it flashes and crackles in the distance.

“If we were able to fly,” Griff starts, “then we could have flown over there or even carried people over there. We would have been able to see any threats between us and the portal from the air, and it would have been so much quicker.”

“Which is probably why the wings were taken away,” I point out.

River frowns, “I really hope that is the only reason that they were taken away.”

“Agreed. It’s inconvenient to have to get there on foot without knowing the dangers that could be waiting, but it’s only inconvenient as opposed to it being dangerous,” Raiden agrees.

“Good point,” I reply, in agreement.

“I can hear something,” Coen frowns. “I can’t quite make out what it is.”

River lifts his nose in the air, “I can smell something as well, but I can’t put my finger on what it is, my nose isn’t working like it should.”

It turns out that no one’s senses are working quite like they should be because the source of the smell and sound appears a moment later.

“Ah,” Ransom frowns.

“That’s going to be an issue,” River adds, his eyebrows high on his forehead.

My own eyes are wide as I stare at the giant gorge, it’s far too wide to jump across, and the river at the bottom is moving far too quickly for us to wade through, even if we could get down there.

Then I spot it, a rope bridge. One that looks incredibly unsafe and like it would snap

under my weight, let alone the weight of all of these very big men. I can't help but say sarcastically, "Oh, don't worry, guys, there's a bridge."

River smirks, waves his fists like he is holding pom poms, and says, "Yey."

I burst out laughing.

"I hardly think that this is a laughing matter," Jamie exclaims, glaring at me.

I roll my eyes, "Why not? There's no point being miserable about everything."

"Alright," Evander says before we can descend into an argument, "well, we aren't going to be able to fly across."

"And that bridge doesn't exactly look strong enough to take even one of us," Coen adds.

"But I can see the portal, so we have to be able to cross somehow," Raiden says, his mind working to come up with a solution while the Draconian team seems just to stand there, not trying to help us figure out how to get across.

I get the feeling that Jamie and the one whose name I still don't know want to help, but they keep looking at Kylen nervously, and Kylen, in return, keeps giving them warning looks.

"It looks like the water is moving far too quickly for us to be able to scale down the cliff and walk across, and then go up the other side," Doc says thoughtfully.

"It may not be as deep as it looks," the one whose name I don't know suggests, and then immediately winces.

“Let’s find out, Fetrick,” Kylen replies, his voice full of malice, as without warning, he shoves Fetrick so hard that he stumbles off the cliff.

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Coen must have been expecting the reaction because, without skipping a beat, and while the rest of us are still staring shocked at Kylen's actions, Coen dives over the side of the cliff after Fetrick.

I don't even bother to control my reaction as we all rush to the edge to look over, and see if they've survived the fall. My eyebrows rise as I see Coen, his sword jammed into the rocky side of the cliff, as he holds onto it with one hand, and Fetrick with the other.

"What the fuck are you playing at!" Rupert explodes at Kylen.

Kylen just smirks and shrugs, like it's not a big deal. He really doesn't care that he nearly killed a teammate, and it would have been death. The drop is far too far, and despite what was suggested earlier the water is definitely deep, really fucking deep from what I can tell. I'm pretty sure that if Kylen hadn't thrown Fetrick off the fucking cliff, Evander would have been able to tell everyone that it's really deep.

Coen

"Are you hurt?" I ask Fetrick.

"No," he replies, sounding shaken up, which is more than understandable since his leader just pushed him off a fucking cliff.

"Okay, I'm going to swing you close to the cliffside, just like last time. I won't let go until you've got a good grip and can go up by yourself, okay?"

“Got it,” Fetrick replies.

Fortunately for both of us, he manages to grab hold of the wall on the first try.

I shift my claws and dig them deep into the rock, before I pull out my sword and put it in the harness on my back. As I begin to climb though, his quiet voice stops me.

“Thank you for saving me again,” he says barely above a whisper. Most likely worried that Kylen is going to hear.

His words surprise me, so my only reply is to nod and begin climbing again.

“It’s a ring,” he says, somehow even quieter, and stops climbing as I glance over at him in confusion.

I can hear Rupert and Kylen screaming at each other, and while I’m aware that they need to shut the fuck up before they bring unwanted attention to us, it means that they are less likely to be aware of what is happening down here, especially since I can’t see Jamie, which means he’s most like watching the drama unfold.

“What’s a ring?” I ask, as equally quietly.

It’s silent for a moment, and I contemplate starting to move again. It’s rare that he ever speaks to me, keeping to himself as much as I do really, when I can get away with it. Just as I think that he’s not going to reply, even though he’s still hanging there and not climbing any higher, he finally speaks.

“You have a necklace, I have a ring,” he replies.

It instantly clicks, and shock floods through my system. I had absolutely no idea that he was being controlled in the same way that I am. He’s been with Kylen from the



first year at the academy. They've been together since the second day at the academy. I think they were roommates.

"Fuck," I reply, remembering at the last minute to keep my voice quiet. We begin climbing. I don't want anyone to get suspicious. "Why didn't you ever say anything?"

The look that Fetrick gives me shows a spark of amusement, and I realize that I haven't seen that look very often. I knew that Kylen had something over the others, but I had no idea that he was being controlled by him like I am. Now that I'm thinking about it though, it does explain why his personality has seemed to clash at times. He's always been the one who was the nicest to me.

"One, I haven't been able to speak about it before now. I don't know why I can now, and two, I helped to," he pauses before he finishes his sentence, his eyes clouding with regret and anger.

I remember that we're being filmed, hopefully everyone is focused on what's happening up top, but either way, he has been really careful about how he's wording what he's saying. I also realize that he's referring to the fact that he's been present and joined in on the torture sessions that Kylen likes to give me.

I study his expression, he's pissed and grimacing, to be honest he looks disgusted and that's not the face of someone who wanted to take part in that kind of thing.

"Huh, well, at least you didn't want to. Besides, if he told you to, then you had no choice. I get that more than anyone," I say.

"Seriously?" he asks in shock.

I just shrug, we're getting closer to the top now, and I want to know one more thing,

“Are the others as well?”

Fetrick shakes his head, “Nope, just us.”

I nod.

I want to ask questions, like how, and has he been controlled right from the beginning, and all of that, but I can't do that not right now, not without risking being heard by the rest of the Draconian team, or all of the supernaturals watching.

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So I stay silent. There's not much else I can say. It's not like I can tell him that we'll sort it, and we'll make sure that he gets freed, because he could pass that information on to Kylen, even if he doesn't want to. If Kylen gets suspicious, and since I've now saved Fetrick's life twice, Kylen will think that he has put two and two together, and that we're in cahoots or some shit, which would just be amusing, except for the fact that it would mean that Kylen will interrogate Fetrick and force him to tell him the truth.

And me.

I can't risk him asking me about Neith and having to answer honestly. I am not putting her at risk, or risking them not being able to get me out of this fucking situation. I know that they're doing that, although I'm not sure how. I do have a few ideas since they sent Ribit to have a look at the necklace and I don't want to fuck everything up because I have no choice but to speak.

So, I don't say anything to Fetrick, we're too close to the top now to say anything anyway. We do, however, share a look. I hope that he recognizes the understanding in my expression and maybe even the hope. I want him to have hope that he's going to be his own person again. He's been trapped for years longer than I have. Fuck knows what that has done to him, and his relationships. I lost Neith when Kylen stopped allowing me to go back to the keep, and of course, I lost the guys before that. They all thought that I hated them and wanted to be on Kylen's team because I told them that myself.

Not only that, but if I had family, then I would have been made to cut ties with them as well.

There is a very good chance that Kylen has stopped Fetrick from contacting his family, or even made sure that any familial ties have been well and truly broken. That sounds like a thing that Kylen would do, and to be honest, I have never heard Fetrick speak of his family. He's a shifter, and they always live in packs. They don't have to live in packs with shifters of their kind, mixed packs have been known to exist, but tend to present their own challenges and get complicated. Shifters are always in packs, though. So it's very unlikely that Fetrick doesn't have family, if not parents, then there should be aunts, uncles, cousins, all manner of extended family, both related and technically not related, that would care about him.

River is the exception because of the way that Kitsunes' work and because he's so much stronger than all the other Kitsunes, and that presents a lot of issues. River adopted the guys and me as his pack though, and somehow it works for him.

Although Kylen doesn't seem to take his anger out on Fetrick like he does on me, and looking back over their interactions, I am reasonably sure that it's more orders than anything else. Kylen wants to make me miserable because he hates the guys. As if he can read my mind, Fetrick speaks up one last time.

"It's different," he says, and I glance at him. Trying to be careful, he adds, "Orders only."

My eyes widen slightly. "Can you read my mind?"

Fetrick grins, he holds his finger to his lips, briefly letting go of the cliffside, "Not usually, but I caught some snippets then, I think because it was aimed at me."

I nod, "Well, I didn't know that about you."

"No one does," he says, and I hear the meaning behind his words, and incline my head slightly to let him know that I understand and won't say anything to Kylen and

the others. Not that I would be likely to anyway. He continues, “Of course, there’s a chance that everyone knows now.”

I grin, “Yeah, there is that.”

He shakes his head, and we carry on climbing up to the top.

I silently vow that I’m going to help him. I absolutely can’t leave him in the situation that he’s currently in, not if I can help him.

Kylen’s a vicious and ruthless cunt.

Neith

Reed helps to pull Coen over the edge and then reaches down to help Fetrick too, which seems to shock him.

I don’t know what it is about him, but there’s something about the way that he’s behaving that I don’t like. Not that he’s behaving suspiciously or I think he’s a threat, but rather that he may be under threat. He’s staying close to Coen, like he considers him to be safe, which he is, but Fetrick should feel like that about his other team members as well, and he clearly doesn’t.

He’s behaving like someone abused, and I am even more convinced that’s the case after Kylen calls for him.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Neith

“Fetrick!” Kylen growls in warning simply because he’s close to us.

Fetrick's eyes narrow, but instead of getting angry with Kylen for pushing him off a cliff, Fetrick's eyes lower submissively and he fucking apologizes to Kylen. My eyebrows rise in disbelief. Something is definitely not right with that situation.

Fetrick is not a small supernatural, although few are. He's got broad shoulders and a full beard, with dark hair shoved up haphazardly on his head. He's actually bigger than Kylen, but he's behaving like Kylen is a threat.

We all know that's true, but only because he cheats. If he went toe to toe with Coen without the necklace he's got on, then Coen would decimate him without even breaking a sweat.

Kylen knows that, which is partly why he insists on controlling him the way he does.

Hopefully for not much longer though.

"What was that?" River suddenly asks, tilting his head to the side like he's listening to something.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:48 am*

Everyone freezes and listens intently.

“Something big,” Ransom says, his eyes widening. “Or lots of somethings moving together.”

Before anyone can do or say anything, the ground beneath our feet rumbles and shakes so violently that I struggle to stay on my feet. I call Asael to my hand, something tells me whatever is coming isn’t friendly. The ground splits open in about two-meter-wide slices, and out of each slice appears a creature that, like the flying things, looks prehistoric in nature.

They’re standing on two legs, easily seven feet tall, covered in scales, and quite frankly look like a velociraptor except a lot bigger, and have double of everything. Two tails, four little clawed arms, and two big giant snappy heads. Its heads are so big, almost the length of its body, excluding the tails, that I have no idea how it’s not falling over and landing on its faces.

Oh, and it’s on fire.

“That’s not good,” I mutter sarcastically.

The ground is still rumbling, and more and more of these creatures are appearing from under the ground. They don’t start off on fire, but as soon as they have fully emerged, they are engulfed by flames. They don’t seem to be in pain or anything, so I’m pretty sure that they’re supposed to do that, and that it most likely makes them incredibly hard to fight.

The more that appear, the more apparent it becomes that there is no way that we're going to be able to fight them. There are only a few of us, but there are hundreds of them, and more keep appearing, as I stare in absolute shock.

"Over the bridge!" Evander says, trying to sound calm, coming to the same conclusion that I am, that there is no way that we're going to win against them.

Everyone starts to move toward the bridge slowly, none of us wanting to make any sudden movements and entice the creatures to attack since, at the moment, they're all still emerging from the ground.

"Are you sure?" Doc asks worriedly. "It's not going to hold us."

"We don't have a choice, we can't survive being attacked by all of them. We will get overwhelmed by the sheer number of them," Evander replies.

Suddenly, they all rush toward us, leaving us no time to try to come up with an alternative route. We all run onto the bridge, moving across it as quickly as we can. It's a single file, and as I run, I can feel the boards groaning beneath my feet, making me incredibly nervous as I try not to look down at the raging water below. Van's behind me, and Reed is in front, the others all spread out along the bridge, and I can't help but shout as I see Doc's foot go through one of the boards. Fetrick grabs hold of him before he can fall any heavier on them and risk breaking more.

I'll be surprised about that later, right now I need to focus on getting across this bridge alive.

Glancing back, I see Griff step onto the bridge. He's the last person on it, and as soon as he's a couple of meters on, the whole thing disappears.

It doesn't break, it doesn't crumble, it simply disappears completely. One second it's



there, and I'm hoping that it doesn't snap under our weight, and the next moment it's simply not there. No trace that it once existed.

We all plunge toward the water, and a scream bubbles from my throat in sheer terror as we fall. I may like heights, but I do not like falling.

Evander's arm wraps around my waist like a steel band as we hit the icy water and plunge below its depths. For a brief and terrifying moment, we're thrown around under the water, and I have no idea which way is up. Evander doesn't let go of me, and I catch sight of his scaled arm still wrapped around my waist.

He's gone full siren mode.

In seconds that feel like hours, my head breaks the water, and I take a huge breath, gasping for air as I frantically look around for the others. I find them all, including the Draconian team, with their heads above water and seemingly being held still like Evander and I are.

"Are you keeping them steady?" I ask, over the roar of the water.

"I can't do it for much longer," Evander replies. The strain is already evident in his voice. "There are too many of us, and this water is magically charged and too strong."

"Fuck," Reed curses, close enough that he can hear us.

"I can't put the ward around us, or do much at all. I tried when we fell. My magic is too worn out," Ransom shouts over the sound of the raging water.

"The kelpies!" Raiden suddenly exclaims.

We wanted to avoid using them if we could, it's not something that we wanted to let

most of the supernatural world know that we were capable of doing. Having a bond with a kelpie is an incredibly rare thing, and therefore a powerful thing as well. One that will most likely be sought after.

We don't have a choice though, Evander can't keep this up for much longer, and the water is moving so fast that we will all easily get swept away, not to mention that there are jagged rocks and fuck knows what living here. If the water is magic, then it could be concealing all manner of creatures.

“What the fuck do you mean kelpies?” Rupert exclaims, looking around and panicking.

There's no time to explain. The water is starting to move us more and more, and I can feel the tension in Evander's body as he tries to keep us all afloat. As the guys begin to whistle to call their kelpies, I start to do the same with the intention of calling them all to me, so that the Draconian team can ride their own, but the voices rise in warning, very clearly telling me that I should only call Mael. As always, I don't question them, and I call Mael only.

He appears seconds later, along with all of the others, and Van releases me as I swing up onto his back with immeasurable relief.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:48 am*

Leaning forward I wrap my hands around his neck, “You have no idea how fucking glad I am to see you.”

He snorts in concern, but I urge him over to Coen, who just happens to be closest to me.

“Hop up,” I say urgently.

Coen doesn’t even question me if it’s safe, he just immediately climbs up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. I try not to melt into him like I want to.

“Fucking kelpies,” he mutters near my ear in awe. “You never cease to amaze me, Love.”

A shudder goes through me at his words, and how close he is to me.

“For fuck sake! I can’t keep your head above water for much longer,” Evander snaps angrily.

Looking over to where he and Griff, and of course their kelpies are, I see them near Kylen and Rupert who both look absolutely fucking terrified. I can’t say I blame them. Kelpies have a well-founded reputation, but we are sitting on them, which should tell Kylen and Rupert that these ones at least won’t eat them. They don’t really have a choice. They will die if they don’t get on them.

Petrick is already on the back of River’s kelpie, Reath, and it looks like Jamie has only just been convinced to get on the back of Raiden’s kelpie, Mavros, although no

one looks happy about that situation.

Finally, the other two get up on Reed and Evander's kelpies.

"What's the plan?" Ransom asks, and all of us are now fairly relaxed that the kelpies are here. Well, the guys and I are, everyone on the Draconian team, apart from Fetrick and Coen, are looking terrified and extremely tense. None of them seem to be struggling at all, and it's almost like we're standing around in a field talking, rather than in the middle of a raging magical river that we were moments away from drowning in.

"We need to find a place where the kelpies can climb out and get us up to the top," Evander replies.

"The portal is further down the river anyway, so I think we should just head that way, and hope that there is a space that we can get out," Doc adds.

"I don't want to be on these disgusting creatures for any longer than I have to be," Kylen spits.

"Asshole," Coen mutters in my ear.

I'm reasonably certain that no one else can hear him or even knows that he's speaking to me since he's pressed so tightly against me.

I fucking love it.

Although I would love it more if I could respond, or sink into his embrace, we're so close to the end of the Choosing though. This is the last task, or at least we think it is, and we have managed to keep the fact that Coen knows me from Kylen so far. It would really fucking suck if we slipped up now. It would cause so many

complications from Coen's point of view, which I'm not entirely sure about the specific reasons, but also because it means that he is less likely to allow Coen to be anywhere near us.

Kylen already knows that he can be near the guys and that his control over him keeps Coen from interacting with the guys like he used to, at least it was that way, but throwing me into the mix would most likely be a risk too many, and Kylen is likely to make sure that Coen and the rest of the Draconian team stay away from us, which will make our plan for switching out the necklace and freeing Coen from Kylen's control a lot more difficult.

Van turns to look Kylen, fire in his eyes, "Carry on talking like that and I'll fucking feed you to him. I don't think anyone would be sad to see you go."

Kylen splutters and hisses, shifting about on the back of Van's kelpie Kaelar, and from here I can see him dig his boots viciously into Kaelar's side. Of course, Kaelar bucks, sending Kylen flying, while Evander stays on with ease.

"He was deliberately hurting Kaelar," Raiden says, having seen the same thing that I did.

Evander scowls as he strokes Kaelar's neck, comforting him.

We all watch as Kylen gets pulled further down the river, sputtering as his head keeps getting pulled under.

"Aren't you going to help him?" Rupert asks.

Van shrugs, "I did, he hurt Kaelar on purpose and got bucked off, there is absolutely no way that Kaelar will let him back on now. Not that I want him on."

“Van,” River starts. “We all have to get through the portal alive.”

“For fuck sake,” Van mutters.

He urges Kaelar forward, and we all follow, as we quickly catch up to a still struggling Kylen. Van’s magic fills the air, and Kylen’s head appears above water and then stays there.

He glares at Van, “Let me up.”

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“No,” Van replies simply.

“I’m warning you, let me get back up on that disgusting creature,” Kylen shouts.

“Man, I think you’re lucky that he saved you in the first place, shut the fuck up,” Jamie tells him.

It surprises me, but I have quickly come to learn that even though the others are all assholes, apart from Coen, and actually maybe even Fetrick, none of them have any respect for Kylen. They don’t fucking like him. I think if they had a normal leader, they may have even actually helped, rather than sitting back and letting us do all of the work.

I could be wrong, but that’s the impression I get.

Kylen carries on cursing as we move further down the river to where the portal is, or at least the rough direction that we think it’s in. Every now and then, Kylen’s head dips back under the water, and he comes up spluttering again, and every time Van shrugs and apologizes, saying that his magic is really tired thanks to having to save all of us when we first fell.

I have a feeling that his magic is more than capable of keeping Kylen afloat, but he’s choosing not to because of the pure vitriol coming out of Kylen’s mouth.

Eventually, the banks of the river begin to change, and instead of being sheer cliff sides, they start to flatten out, and there start to be trees and more of an actual bank at the side.

“There,” Ransom points out. “I think we could get up the side of the cliff there, it looks like there’s a path winding up.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” Griff agrees.

We all head toward the bank, and the kelpies effortlessly make their way up. Evander takes off the magical protection on Kylen, just as Kylen gets to the bank, and we all carry on forward as he struggles to get out.

I would feel bad, but I know that we’re only scratching the surface of what he’s done to Coen and what he’s made him do, and quite frankly, I have a feeling that he deserves so much worse than a bit of icy water, and struggling to get out of a river.

No one says anything, all of us are pretty fucking exhausted by this point. We’re all soaking wet, and the only reason why I’m not shivering is because I have Coen pressed up against me, and he’s like a furnace. Dragons tend to run a lot hotter than most supes, apart from winter dragons, and ones with magic that rely on the cold.

The cliff path that Raiden saw from the water is really fucking steep, but the kelpies don’t seem to struggle too much, and we are soon all at the top. Our aim was pretty perfect, and the portal is only a few meters away from the edge.

As soon as the kelpies stop, all of the Draconian team practically throw themselves off them, and they cautiously move as far away from them as possible. Coen sighs heavily, squeezes me tightly once, and then gets off. Mael nudges him as he walks past, and Coen stops, turning to stroke Mael’s nose.

I can’t help but smile as I see them interacting, and Mael obviously likes Coen, that means a lot to me. Especially since I glance up just in time to see Mavros, Raiden’s kelpie, snap at Jamie when he tries to do the same.



“What the fuck,” Jamie growls, and stomps off.

“Coen!” Kylen snaps. “Go through the portal now.”

Coen’s whole body tenses, and he grits his teeth as a low growl rumbles in his chest. Moving stiffly, he follows Kylen’s command, not even looking at any of us as he passes.

I have to bite my tongue pretty fucking hard, and thread my hands into Mael’s mane to stop myself from cursing out Kylen, and throwing something sharp and pointy at him, preferably in his heart. When they’ve all disappeared through the portal, the rest of us dismount, and I move to Mael’s head.

“Thank you, buddy. You did a great job, and saved our asses,” I tell him softly, and kiss him on his nose making him huff and then nudge me for more kisses.

“We need to send them back, we should probably get out of here before something else shows up that wants to eat us,” Van says, sounding a lot more relaxed now that the Draconian team has disappeared.

“Or the Draconian team find a way to close the portal so we can’t get out,” River says, only half joking.

I think if Kylen and the others could lock us in this realm forever, then they absolutely would.

“Good point,” Evander agrees with a frown.

One by one, we all say goodbye to our kelpies after thanking them and promising to come and see them when we get home, and then send them home.

Once that's done, we then all walk toward the portal, Reed grabs hold of my hand just before we walk through it.

Answering my curious look, he says, "I'm not risking you going one place and us going to another."

I grin and nod, holding his hand tighter. "Me neither."

Stepping through the portal, I am so incredibly pleased to find myself in the guy's room and, more importantly, surrounded by a hell of a lot of food. Mabel and her team must have laid it out for us, and I'm going to give her a ginormous hug when I see her next.

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She must have watched the Choosing and realized that when we came out, we would all be starving.

She's awesome.

### Chapter Twenty-Eight

Neith

"Is everyone here?" Evander asks immediately.

Sounding absolutely exhausted, Ransom replies, "Yeah, we're all here."

"Thank fuck," Reed rumbles.

"That was not fucking fun," Raiden adds.

River nods, but before he can say anything, my stomach makes itself known, loudly, and quite frighteningly if I'm being honest.

River smiles, "You can use my shower to get warm and change into dry clothes, and then you can tuck into this food."

I start to say thank you when I realize that we're in the castle and we're no longer being filmed, so instead of saying thank you, I run and jump at him.

River catches me with ease as my lips slam down against his, and our tongues dance

together. Fucking hell, I have missed kissing River.

Hell, I've missed kissing all of them.

They all realize the same thing as I do, because I'm tugged from River's arms and into Doc's, and then around all of the others as well.

By the time that I've kissed them all, I can't remember my own name, let alone what I was supposed to be doing.

"Go shower, Nene," Evander reminds me, with a proud smile.

My stomach grumbles, "Right, shower then food."

I lean down and grab my bag, which was left in the front room, and then head down the hallway that leads to all of the bedrooms. The guys all follow me as they split up to go into their separate rooms to shower and get changed. We haven't showered in two days, we haven't eaten either, although we did have water with us, we could share. Evander pulled what he could out of the air to fill up the canteens, but we had to use them sparingly since the realm was so hot that it wasn't that easy to do. Fortunately, supernaturals are capable of going for prolonged periods of time with no food and little water, and apparently that stretches to me, too.

That doesn't make me any less hungry, though.

River winks at me.

"I would say, do you want some company, but I think that would be far too tempting, and you're not fully supernatural, yet," his eyes blaze. They dull slightly as he adds, "Plus, we're tired and hungry. It's never a good idea to have sex when you're hungry."

I burst out laughing, “I wasn’t aware of that rule.”

“It’s a River rule,” he smirks. His smile falls into a frown as I shiver, “Go and shower and warm up. Feel free to go through my stuff if you want to wear something comfy, remember we’re not going to get called again.”

My eyes widen, “Holy fuck, I forgot about that.” Grinning, I add, You, my friend, are about to be robbed.”

“Friend?” River asks with his eyebrow raised. “I rather hoped we were more than that.”

“I’m good with that,” I reply, trying to sound casual, and not freak out, and be all giddy as the butterflies take flight in my stomach.

I’m good with being more than friends.

His smile is beautiful, and I decide that I’ve pushed my brain- to- mouth filter far enough and turn on my heel heading into River’s room.

After rummaging through his clothes, I decide to pinch one of his giant hoodies and then head into the shower. I am far colder than I realized because the warm water stings my skin, and it takes me a moment to warm up. I rush through the shower, and getting dressed, and then quickly make my way back out to the front room, finding all of the guys there, including River, all freshly showered.

River’s eyes heat as they see me dressed in his hoodie, but my gaze is purely for the food.

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The guys make amused sounds as I plop my ass down on the floor close to the food, and practically inhale it. Ignoring them entirely.

???

The next day we spend resting, all of us are absolutely exhausted from the whole ordeal and really fucking hungry. Fortunately, Mabel and the others had absolutely no problem letting us eat in our room, and that's pretty much all we did. We stayed in comfy clothes for the first time since we arrived, since we realized that we weren't going to get called at any time, and everyone took really long showers for the same reason.

Then we piled into the front room, ate, slept, and just recharged. It was fucking amazing. The only thing that would have made it better would have been if Coen were with us.

We did emerge from the comfort of our room at one point because I wanted to go and find Ribit, but no matter where we looked, she wasn't there. Raiden said that there's a chance that because she used so much power to put the ghost mark on Kylen's face, she needed to recharge and rest for a while. I'm still hoping that I'm going to be able to find her before we go.

Waking up this morning surrounded by my men, and without the fear of being pulled into a trial, was pretty fucking awesome, but nerves soon took over and now I'm just a wreck. I know that we're a good team, and I know that I belong with the guys, but there's a small, terrified part of me that's telling me that I'm going to be put on the Draconian team, and filling my head with thoughts of all that could entail.

It's fucking terrifying.

There's a knock on the guy's door, and River pulls it open to find Mabel and a couple of other people standing there holding trays of food.

"Eat up, it's almost time to go to the chamber for the scroll reading," she says and then grins. "You're dressed, that's good, only one of the other team was even up."

Three guesses who that was.

"What can we expect from today?" Doc asks, and then adds, "I know that you won't be able to tell us a lot."

Mabel nods, "I will take you to the chamber, which is in a separate building on the castle grounds, along with the Draconian team. You will all enter it together. Inside, someone will read the scroll out for you. The team that doesn't get Neith will then exit the chamber, and the team that is then a bonded Warrior team will receive their extra gifts. There is a silencing spell placed on all who enter, and no one will be able to get around that."

"Whatever happens in the chamber cannot be discussed with anyone outside of it?" Evander clarifies.

Mabel nods, "Yes, but more than that, the losing team will not be able to discuss or write down, or anything similar, any of the events that happened in the chamber. It's for safety reasons, as the losing team or teams, in some cases, tend to harbor ill will toward the winners. It was a problem in the past, so it was implemented a few hundred years ago."

"That's a really good idea," Griff says.

“Definitely, the Draconian team would definitely spout shit if they were given the opportunity,” Ransom says.

Mabel nods, “Exactly. Now eat up, you haven’t got very long, and I will be back for you.”

We all nod and thank her again before we take our seats and start to eat.

I have a heavy feeling in my stomach, something is going to happen, I can feel it. I have no idea whether it’s going to be good or bad, but maybe that’s because it doesn’t know yet.

I don’t know who it is, maybe the universe, maybe the Gods, who knows, but something more than what we think is going to happen.

Hell, maybe it’s nerves, I am quietly panicking that I won’t be put on the guy’s team. In fact, my nerves are beginning to get to me, so much so that I can’t eat very much at all.

After pushing my food around my plate for a while someone finally knocks on the door.

“Let’s do this,” Griff says, as we all stand up.

Doc pulls open the door, and Mabel smiles at us, “The Draconian team will meet us down in the main hall by the front door. Freddy has gone to get them.”

Evander nods, “Great. We’re ready.”

Mabel smiles again, and we follow her through the castle. She doesn’t seem tense or nervous, but then again, why would she be? She’s probably seen hundreds of these.



This is just a normal workday for her. Hoping to distract myself from the swarm of butterflies in my stomach, I look out for Ribit on the way. I was really hoping that I would be able to find her and say goodbye.

I should get a chance to say goodbye after the whole scroll thing, but I'm not sure how long we'll have before we have to leave. No one's told us that, and I'm not really in the mood to ask.

When we get to the main hall, the Draconian team is already there. Kylen looks pissed, but the rest of them all look apprehensive, and Coen looks absolutely exhausted. If possible, he looks even more tired than he did when we finished the last trial. He doesn't look at me as we all follow Mabel and a couple of others out of the door, and through the grounds, but I notice that he's moving stiffly.

Far stiffer than he should be moving, considering he's just had an entire day of rest. I don't like it, and judging by the frown on Doc and River's faces, they have noticed as well and don't like it either. There is fuck all that we can do about it right now, we're surrounded by the Draconian team, and if I remember correctly, Sully said that they film this bit, but not inside the chamber. Not that we could do anything about it anyway, I think bitterly.

"Here we are," Mabel announces with a smile.

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She stops outside a set of ornately carved wooden doors that are so big that they could have been made for actual giants, and I'm not even exaggerating.

"Wow," I mutter in awe, and Mabel smiles at me.

Kylen huffs and rolls his eyes, "Come on then, let's get this over with, and find out that the cunt is supposed to be on our team."

Kylen hits the floor as Coen's fist comes out of nowhere and knocks him clean out.

There's a moment of shock before everyone, including Fetrick and Rupert, starts chuckling.

"Oh dear," Mabel says. "Does someone care to wake him? We really should get inside."

Evander grins, "Say no more."

Kylen sits bolt upright, spluttering and coughing, as Evander drops water over his face to wake him up.

"What happened?" he immediately demands as he stands up.

"No time for that now," Mabel says, as she begins to usher everybody through the door.

I'm still smiling as we all walk into a ginormous single room. The ceilings are

domed, and so high that while I can tell that there is something painted on them, I have no idea what it is, although I imagine that it's a similar design to the one that carries on down the walls, and covers the floor too. If that's the case, then the design on the ceiling is made up of battles, and supernaturals from all the realms, some that I don't recognize, and some that are very familiar to me. It's absolutely fascinating, but now that we're in here, the end is so fucking close that I just want to be done with it.

The room is almost completely empty, standing in the middle is fairly ordinary looking supernatural, he's big, but not as big as any of my guys, and he's wearing robes, but the most notable thing about him is that he's got grey hair and a neatly trimmed grey beard as well. Supernaturals take a really, really long time to go grey. Meaning, he is really fucking old. I wonder if he's been here since the very first one, but as my mouth opens to ask, I remember the situation we're in and snap it closed before anything comes out.

I have no idea what kind of supernatural he is, apart from the purplish tinge to his skin; there is no other discernible quality. He's standing by the only other thing in the room—a copper-veined, black stone plinth, with a very ancient-looking scroll resting on top.

Excitement builds, and I shift on my feet, unable to stay still.

“I need one team on the left, one team on the right, and Neith in the middle, please,” he orders, his voice deep and full of wisdom.

I don't know why it surprises me that he knows my name, he probably knows the names of all the guys, too, but my eyebrows do rise slightly in surprise as I move to stand where he has asked me to.

“Great, I'm Edwingliusly, but you may call me Ed since it's easier to remember. So, this is pretty straightforward. I'm sure by this point you all want to get back to your

lives,” he starts, with a smile that instantly makes me like him. “I’m going to say the spell to activate the scroll, which will allow the Choosing to put the team chosen on the scroll, which could take seconds, or it could take a little bit longer. We wait. I will then read the scroll and announce which team Neith will be on and the new Warrior Team. Then the other team will exit, and the Warrior Team will receive their new gifts. After that, you will be free to leave and head back to the castle.”

It seems a little bit anticlimactic, after everything that we’ve been through, but the more that I think about it, the more it makes sense. I don’t want a big fuss made, and I know that the guys wouldn’t either. Plus, whichever team wins is going to get a lot of attention from a lot of powerful supernaturals when they leave here.

Shit.

Why hadn’t I thought about that before, that’s going to be a fucking nightmare if we win. Hopefully, Ty will be on it by the time that we get back, and everyone will have chilled out a bit. It’s not like we will be going straight back to work anyway. I need at least a week off before anything else hits the fan. I need to find Pete and deal with all of that as well.

The voices chide me for not paying attention to what’s going on, and I almost smack myself.

“That’s it?” Kylen asks.

Ed narrows his eyes at Kylen, “What were you expecting, a parade?”

“Yes,” Kylen retorts.

“That wouldn’t be very smart, would it?” Ed asks. “Whoever wins is going to be pretty weak after the magic transfer, which will give them new gifts, which means

that they will be vulnerable for a short amount of time. Having a parade wouldn't be a good idea when there are some people out there who would take advantage of that."

Kylen doesn't say anything, and I cringe. This supernatural deserves a hell of a lot of respect, and Kylen is giving him nothing.

"Sorry," I can't help but say.

Ed's gaze moves to me and instantly softens. "Don't need to be apologizing for someone else, Neith."

I shrug, "I know, but I felt like you deserved an apology, and he sure as shit wasn't going to give you one."

"Fuck you," Kylen growls.

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“Enough!” Ed booms, his power snaps out hard and strong, and everyone drops to their knees. I realize half a second after it’s happened that I probably should too, and I hope that he didn’t pick up on the fact that I didn’t do it straight away like the others did.

Glancing up through my eyelashes, I find him looking at me with a knowing smile, and I simply return it and shrug slightly.

“You may rise again,” he orders. Once everyone is on their feet, and Kylen actually looks properly chastised, he continues, “I will now recite the spell. Please remain silent.”

No one says a word as Ed calls on his magic, his eyes begin to glow a stunning electric blue as words that I have no hope in understanding tumble from his mouth in the most beautiful way. The scroll lifts from its perch atop the plinth and starts to glow the same electric blue that Ed’s eyes are. I feel when the Choosing’s magic hits the scroll, it’s not a boom or a blast, it’s a gentle roll of such immense and quiet power that it leaves me in awe.

It takes a few minutes, but just as I start to get worried, that massive presence disappears again, and Ed smiles.

“Now, let’s see which team you will be on, shall we?” he asks me.

I nod, I couldn’t reply if I tried. My tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth with nerves, and the butterflies in my stomach have turned into great big, huge, angry bats.

To be honest, I can barely nod.

Thankfully, Ed seems to get that I'm nervous, and he just carries on with his thing and unrolls the scroll.

"Neith, I am pleased to tell you that your new team is Evander's," he gestures to the guy's, and I grin as relief crashes over me and the guys all yell with joy and excitement. Ed sees that they're about to come toward me and says, "Please stay where you are for a moment." He carries on unravelling the scroll and his eyebrows rise, "Oh, well, it appears that the Choosing has also decided that Coen from the Draconian team belongs on Evander's team."

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Neith

My eyes widen and my mouth drops open in shock, as my gaze snaps over to Coen, who looks even more shocked than I do.

"Pardon?" he whispers, hope sparking in his eyes.

Ed smiles gently, "You are now on Evander's team. It seems that the Choosing thought that you were a better fit there."

"I," Coen starts, and then just stops, overcome with emotion.

"You may move over to your new team, Neith, please stay there for a moment longer, I promise there is a reason, although rather ridiculous, it's all about following tradition," Ed explains.

I nod, my smile absolutely enormous, "That's okay, I'm happy to respect tradition."

Coen grins at me as he walks past, and I return it, wishing that I could hug him, but respecting Ed and the place that we're in by staying put.

"You can't do that!" Kylen bellows.

"Quiet!" Ed rumbles again, as only Kylen is forced to his knees. Ed frowns as the scroll glows once, and he unravels it further. "Oh my. This has never happened before. I'm not to read this next part out loud, and you are to take the scroll with you for the first time in memory. It usually stays here."

"Oh?" I ask curiously.

Ed nods and then gestures for all of us to come up to the plinth. As soon as the guys are close enough, I'm pulled under Reed's arm for a quick squeeze before he lets go again.

We all gather around Ed, and he shows us the scroll. I read down the list of names, and my eyebrows hit my hairline as I can't help but gasp out loud in shock. There underneath Coen's name is Kyrous. As in Kyrous, the only person who ever went through the Choosing and wasn't put on a team. The leader of Trieneliea's armies, the trainer of the bonded Warrior Teams, that fucking Kyrous.

What the fuck.

"What's that?" Raiden says, pointing to something that I hadn't noticed.

Just below Kyrous's name is a smudge.

"Just a smudge, nothing of any importance," Ed replies with a reassuring smile. He rolls the scroll up and then hands it to Evander. "Congratulations, I'm sure that . . ."



My ears start ringing as pain blooms in my back, and the guys all stare at me in horror.

Looking down at the blood rapidly spreading on my stomach, I cover it with my hands and mutter, “For fuck sake, I’ve been shot.”

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The guys all rush to me, and someone catches me as my legs give way. My gaze locks on a triumphant looking Kylen.

“Cunt,” I mouth, and grin through the pain knowing that it will piss him off.

Suddenly, there is an almighty boom of power, one that I recognize, and my smile widens, as the necklace around Kylen’s neck shatters into dust.

Now he’s fucked.

Coen’s dragon roars with terrifying anger, and Kylen’s eyes widen in panic as he tries to turn to the rest of his team for aid. They all back up, moving far away, and Coen’s dragon stomps on Kylen, pinning him to the floor and stopping his transformation.

I watch in pain-filled fascination as Coen slices Kylen’s hand off, and then with the other paw crushes the hand into a mushy mess. Wasting no time at all Coen roars again, and then picks up Kylen in the paw that is pinning him and squeezes so hard that Kylen’s fucking head pops off, which is so incredibly macabre, but also funny as fuck.

My laughter turns into a groan of pain, and I’m vaguely aware of the guys gathered around me and Doc trying to do something and sounding more panicked, but I’m laser-focused on Coen as he torches what is left of Kylen with his dragon fire, turning him into dust.

He spins around, lumbering over to me and turning back into his human form as he does. His gaze fills with relief as he sees me watching him. But quickly turns into

panic as darkness pulls on me, and I lose my fight with consciousness.

Ransom

Neith's eyes roll back in her head, and her body slumps.

"What's happening?" Evander panics.

"I can't fucking heal her," Doc growls, "my magic isn't working."

"What?" Coen asks, now back in human form and looking as panicked as the rest of us are.

She's in so much pain, and when I think it can't get any worse, she starts to fit. Her body jerking painfully.

"The bullet that she was shot with has poison on it, she shouldn't be alive. I don't know how the fuck she's alive. She has to be in so much fucking pain, it burns you from the inside," Doc's voice is full of desperation and helplessness as he looks up at us.

Before any of us can react though, Raiden drops to the floor, and starts to writhe in pain.

"What the fuck!" Griff exclaims.

Doc moves over to him, and does a scan, frowning, he says, "His magic is being drained."

"Fuck the tether!" Van exclaims. "That's what's wrong with both of them. Neith can't do her dying and coming back to life thing and . . ."

“Her what?” Coen exclaims.

There’s no time to explain that though as Evander continues, “She’s pulling magic from Raiden, and it’s killing him.”

Neith and Raiden both start convulsing violently, and everyone pushes forward, trying to figure out how to save them both and break the tether so that Neith can do her thing, and Raiden doesn’t die in the process.

I fall to my knees next to her, my hands pressing against the wound on Neith’s stomach in a futile bid to stop the bleeding. Around me is utter chaos, and I’m not the only one with wet cheeks as we watch the horror unfold.

Calm washes over me, my mind clears, and a spell appears in my mind, ancient and so incredibly powerful that no warlock today would be able to perform it, but I know that it will save them both.

“Guys!” I yell, gaining all of their attention. “There’s a spell, it has just come to me. It will save them, but it needs all of us to do it, and I don’t know what the consequences will be.”

“Do it,” they all shout at the same time, their eyes locked on me.

“Put them next to each other and lay their hands together like they’re holding them,” I order, following pure instinct at this point.

The guys quickly do as I’ve asked, and their trust in me boosts my confidence even more.

Once Neith and Raiden are next to each other, the guys don’t need to join their hands, they somehow manage to find each other and link their own hands, even though they

are both still convulsing.

“Everyone needs to lay a hand on their skin, on either of them, it doesn’t matter who, they’re joined.” Everyone immediately does it and then looks at me, waiting for further instructions.

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I place my hand over Neith and Raiden's joined hands and begin to chant. I feel the magic build, steadily growing to something that I have never felt before. The room fills with a buzz that has the guys looking around nervously as the floor beneath us cracks. I feel a thread of my magic snap out and knock the Draconian team out.

Clearly, they aren't supposed to see this.

Finally, my chanting reaches a crescendo, and the power of the spell snaps into place. Different colored threads appear in my mind's eye, eleven of them.

All thoughts of colored strands disappear from my mind as I realize that Neith and Raiden are still and no longer convulsing.

"She's not bleeding anymore," Reed mutters.

Doc's magic flares, and his eyes widen in surprise, "She's healed, the poison has gone, and everything."

Raiden's eyes flutter.

"I think Raiden's waking up," Coen says, his eyes glued to them both.

Raiden groans. He sits up suddenly and glances around him, "Neith!"

"She's here," Griff says, as Raiden's eyes land on her.

"I broke the tether, but it didn't matter, it didn't make a difference," he mutters. "Is

she?”

He starts to ask, unable to finish the sentence.

“I feel like I’ve been hit by a semi-truck, actually seven semi-trucks and then reversed back over,” Neith’s voice is weak, but full of indignation.

I grin, “Thank fuck.”

“You scared the fucking shit out of us,” Coen chastises and then pulls her into his arms.

She grins, “I do that.” Looking at me she says, “Thank you for saving our asses.”

“How did you?” I ask.

“I heard it,” she replies, and then reaches her hands up to Reed, “help me up.”

“Are you sure?” Reed asks, hesitating briefly.

She nods, “Definitely, I feel good. Really good.”

Reed frowns, but slowly picks her up.

Neith smiles up at him, and opens her mouth, no doubt to say something sassy, but before she can, an unfamiliar power builds. It’s incredible in its strength.

“What the fuck now?” River asks.

My eyes widen, “It’s Neith.”

Just as the words leave my mouth, power bursts from her, throwing us all back, and I only just manage to throw up a shield around us all. We stare in shock as the power builds higher and higher. The building around us rumbles, as cracks begin to appear, unable to cope with the amount of sheer fucking power that Neith is throwing out.

A glowing copper and purple light encapsulates Neith, as a wind whips around her in a frenzy.

“It looks like Neith’s supernatural has decided to make an appearance,” River yells in absolute awe over the sound of the building crumbling around us.

If it doesn’t let up in a moment, then the whole thing is going to come down on top of us.

“Fucking hell,” Coen shouts.

I fling a ward at the Draconian team that are still knocked out cold, and then out of the corner of my eye I see Ed struggling and fling a ball of ward at him too, he looks surprised as it wraps around him, but I don’t have time to figure out why as my gaze is brought back to Neith.



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Not that I can see anything through the swirling wind and light, suddenly there's a ginormous power boom that's so strong it knocks through my ward and sends us all sprawling across the floor. My shoulder hits a piece of fallen debris, and I feel the sting of a cut, but ignore it as I jump up, searching the now still, debris-filled room for Neith.

"Oh my gods," Reed exclaims.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" Neith asks.

None of us answers. I don't think we're capable of doing so. I know I'm not, as I stare at her.

Neith has wings.

Huge, feathered wings. They don't look like any that I have seen before though, but that's not a surprise since she's an angel and everyone believes them to be extinct.

The colors of them are amazing, they start off a deep burgundy color and then turn red, orange, yellow before blending into a bright gold on the tips, and each wing is edged in fiery copper.

"Wow," River mutters.

"Guys, you're really starting to freak me out now," Neith starts, her eyes widen, "I've got dick on my forehead haven't I? Only I would turn into a supernatural and get a fucking dick on my forehead."

Coen chuckles, “You don’t have a dick on your forehead, Love.”

Neith

Ifrown, “Well thank fuck for that. I would be awful with dick, I’d be hard all the time, and fucking windmills, I want to try that shit.”

“I, what the fuck are you going on about Nene?” Van asks.

I shrug, and level him with a look, “I’m freaking out. Why are you staring at me?”

“You have wings, gorgeous,” Doc tells me gently.

My eyes widen. “Erm, what?”

“You’ve got big, beautiful wings,” Raiden adds excitedly as he starts to pick his way toward me.

His movement seems to trigger the others, and soon they’re all heading toward me with giant smiles on their faces.

“No freaking way!” I exclaim.

I mean I knew it was a possibility, my mother’s an angel and therefore had wings, but I hadn’t really fucking considered it. I was waiting until after the Choosing to come to terms with all of this shit.

I try to look over my shoulder at them, but only catch a glimpse. So I start turning trying to see them better.

“Whoa, careful Neith,” Griff says. “Those wings look damn sharp. I’d wager that you

could use them as a weapon.”

“I can’t even freaking see them,” I huff as I continue to go around in a circle trying to see them.

I am aware that I look like a dog chasing its tail right now, but I have freaking wings.

Wings!

I want to see them!

“Careful, Neith, you’re going to get dizzy,” Ransom warns a moment too late because I’m suddenly staring up at the ceiling.

“Ow, wings hurt if you fall on them,” I groan, as I stare up at all of my men smiling down at me and looking far too amused. “Having wings is going to take some getting used to.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll help,” Raiden says, Reed and Griff nodding in agreement.

“Come on, let’s get you back on your feet,” Doc says as he holds his hands out to me, and I take them gratefully.

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He pulls me up and then has to hold onto me for a moment longer as I try to get used to my new center of gravity.

“Thank you,” I tell him.

“You’re welcome,” he says softly as his gaze travels over my face, checking that I’m really okay.

It must have been terrifying witnessing me go down like that.

There’s a flash of light behind Doc, and I wince. “What the fuck now.”

Doc moves out of the way, as the guys surround me, being careful of my wings and making sure that I’m stood with them and not behind them as we face whatever the fuck this is.

Standing where the flash of light was, is a dark-haired man, he smiles, showing his teeth, and instantly telling me that he’s a vampire. My eyebrows raise. Well, that’s curious.

He looks at me, “Come with me.”

“No,” I reply shortly, making someone laugh in surprise.

The vampire raises his eyebrow, and looks slightly confused, he’s clearly not used to being told no, “Excuse me?”

“I said no,” I reply, and then when he still looks confused, I add, “if you have any hope of US,” I make sure to emphasize the us, “then you’re going to have to have explain why you want us to come with you, and it better be a damn good explanation, because after what we’ve been through in the last what, hour? I have reached the end of my give a fuck.”

The vampire's surprised expression clears and is replaced with an amused look before it becomes serious again, “That seems like a reasonable request. The elders wish to speak to you.”

“Goody.”