



Dead Ringer (Happily Ever Afterlife #2)

Author: Arden Steele

Category: Fantasy

Description: If someone had asked Rune Calix where he saw himself in a thousand years, his answer definitely wouldn't have involved mediating the petty squabbles of the dead. Still, amid the rack and ruin, he's managed to carve out a life that doesn't make him want to swan dive into the River Acheron. It's neat, organized, predictable—just the way he likes it.

Then a new soul arrives on the riverbank, smelling of honeysuckle and chaos, and threatens to turn his orderly world upside down.

Keegan Marsh is neither confused nor fragile. He's stubborn, resilient, and angry. He also knows hell, and the Underworld isn't it. Not when it comes with a fiercely protective shifter who would die, and maybe even kill, for him. Yet, while death brings freedom, his second chance is also a dark reminder of what he left behind.

Or more precisely...who.

When Keegan is forced to confront a past that already destroyed him once, Rune knows he can't stop him, but he's not about to let him face it alone. He'd wage war through the depths of Tartarus for his mate, but where they're going, his daggers won't help them.

And there's every chance that they won't be coming back.

Total Pages (Source): 13

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:06 am

Chapter one

Life as Keegan Marsh had known it ended in a squeal of tires and a screech of metal.

Maybe it would have been easier to accept if he had someone to blame—a monster to fight or a system to rail against. But it had happened without rhyme or reason, on a dark, rain-washed road, and instead of purpose, he was left with only emptiness where his brother had once been.

Three months later, he still didn't know what he was supposed to do.

Since the accident, he had tried to keep going, to keep showing up, hoping that maybe things would get better.

That it might hurt a little less.

It didn't.

Which probably had something to do with how he'd ended up standing on a cliff at midnight, surrounded by candles.

A chilled breeze carried the scent of brine and evergreens, billowing his T-shirt and ruffling his hair.

It didn't, however, have any effect on the circle of candlelight.

The flames continued to dance merrily, casting an orange glow across the dirt and

pebbles.

A full moon kissed the tops of the trees, its pale beams rippling across the Pacific, distorted by the waves that crashed against the rocky bluffs.

But beyond the push and pull of the ocean, a hush blanketed the area, the night eerily devoid of its usual sounds.

“Are you ready, Keegan?” a pleasant voice asked from the shadows.

Not musical or lyrical.

Just...nice. Kind.

He nodded.

“I’m ready.”

To be clear, he hadn’t gone looking for magic, and he still had reservations, along with a healthy amount of skepticism.

He also had no other options.

When Brie Crowder had first approached him, he had been suspicious of her motives.

In fact, he had considered her a con artist, a grifter who profited off the pain of others.

Especially since she wasn’t a witch, a fae, or any kind of Otherling.

She was just a human, an archaeologist with an interest in the occult.

The more they had spoken, however, the more he had really started to listen.

He hadn't understood most of it, but she had never asked him for anything like money or favors.

She was simply offering him the one thing he needed.

He didn't care about closure or peace.

He didn't want answers.

He just needed the chance to say goodbye, and he'd decided that if this woman could give him that, he didn't really care how she accomplished it.

"Did you bring something that belonged to Noah?"

Gripping the leather cord in his fist, Keegan held the necklace up and nodded.

No matter how much he'd made fun of him for it, Noah had worn the stupid thing everywhere.

Not because he'd found it fashionable, but because he had insisted the obsidian stone encased in copper wire provided powerful magical protection.

But it was just a rock wrapped in cheap craft wire, and it sure as hell hadn't prevented his fate.

Keegan kind of looked forward to giving the silly bastard the I-told-you-so speech.

"The spell will only last for a few minutes," Brie reminded him as she crouched in the grass to remove something from her canvas bag.

“That’s all I need.”

A moment later, she stood again, holding a mirror set into a latticed pewter frame.

Oblong in shape and no bigger than a standard piece of copy paper, it looked ancient, the glass hazy and clouded.

“What is that for?” he asked as he watched her place it on a stand between two of the candles.

“To amplify the moonlight and strengthen the spell.”

Keegan frowned.

The mirror didn’t look to be doing a whole lot of amplifying.

Rather than reflect the sky or even the candlelight, it seemed to absorb it.

Then again, what the hell did he know?

Maybe that was the point.

“And no matter what happens,” Brie added as she rummaged through her bag again.

“Don’t step outside of the circle.”

Keegan jerked his head up, his eyebrows drawn together.

“What does that mean? Why would I leave the circle?”

She glanced up and smiled, accentuating the creases around her eyes and deepening

the lines that bracketed her mouth.

“It can be a little startling to see a deceased loved one.”

Yeah, okay, that made sense.

“What happens if I do?”

She shrugged.

“The spell will end.”

He clutched the necklace tighter and nodded in understanding.

“Take this.” Returning to the edge of the ring created by the candles, she held out what looked like a small log.

“You hold one end. Noah holds the other.”

Keegan took it with a frown.

“Why? What is this?”

Short, squat, with sigils carved into the surface and colorful thread braided around each end, it sort of reminded him of a rainstick.

Except, this one felt solid instead of hollow, and when he tilted it, he heard only the sound of his own heartbeat thrumming in his ears.

“It’s an anchor,” Brie explained.

“It’s difficult for spirits to access our world. This will help tether him.”

So many damn rules.

“Got it.”

“In that case, are you ready to begin?”

Dropping his head, he took a couple of deep breaths through his nose before looking up to meet her gaze again.

“Ready.”

He had expected her to produce some moldy spellbook, or maybe an incantation etched into a crumbling stone tablet.

At the very least, he thought there might be an aged piece of papyrus with symbols scrawled in charcoal.

Seeing her face illuminated by the harsh glare of her cell phone screen, however, hadn’t even made the list.

Then she started chanting, her voice barely more than a murmur on the air, and all those errant thoughts and niggling doubts vanished like shadows in the night.

The hush he had sensed earlier intensified into an oppressive silence, drowning out even the roar of the ocean.

The candlelight flickered, dimmed, then flared like torches, the flames bending and swaying to form a continuous ring of fire.

Wind swirled around the perimeter, bowing tree branches and rustling the new spring leaves, but Keegan felt only stillness.

Unsure where to look or what to do, he gripped the carved stick until his fingers ached and focused on Brie.

Despite the chill, a sheen of perspiration coated her skin, dampening the ends of her bangs so that they clung to her brow.

With her head bent, the moonlight gleamed off a thick strand of silver that marred the otherwise dark bob.

A stripe he was certain hadn't been there when they had first arrived at the cliffside.

"Took you long enough."

Keegan's heart stopped, tripped, then pounded out a staccato as it climbed into his throat.

He hadn't heard that voice in three months, but he would know it anywhere.

Rocks skittered across the ground as he spun around, his limbs heavy but his head floating.

"Noah!"

Identical from the tips of their shaggy blond hair to their slightly curved pinky toes, it should have felt like staring into a mirror.

It didn't. It never had.

In fact, it had always amused him that people couldn't tell them apart when, to him, it was so obvious.

And their mother. They had never been able to fool her.

"Here." He shoved the other end of the talisman at his twin.

"Take this."

Noah arched an eyebrow at him.

"Why are you handing me a stick?"

"Just do it." Little brothers could be so annoying, even if they were only four minutes younger.

"It's supposed to help anchor you."

"Oh, so now you believe in magic," Noah mumbled as he reached out to wrap his fingers around the piece of wood.

"Happy?"

"Very." Both his cheeks and his heart ached with that happiness.

His brother's gaze flickered toward Brie, his hazel eyes filled with suspicion.

"Who's the chick?"

Keegan shook his head.

“Not important. We only have a few minutes.” And he didn’t have a fucking clue what to say.

“How are you?”

“Dead.”

“Asshole.” He couldn’t help but chuckle, though.

Clearly, Noah hadn’t lost his sense of humor.

“I miss you.”

That glib smirk settled into something softer, more emotional.

“I miss you, too, Kee. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

No, it wasn’t.

Noah had been his person, his lifeline, even before they had been born.

Without him, he felt lost, like nothing made sense anymore.

“Are you at least happy where you are?”

Noah shrugged.

“It’s kind of boring, but I don’t hate it.” Then he cocked his head, one eye narrowing at the corner.

“Does mom know you’re doing this?”

He snorted.

“Absolutely not. She’d shit bricks if she—ow!”

The etchings on the wood glowed, their light emitting a stinging heat that seared his skin.

But while instinct told him to release the relic, his fingers flexed, squeezing tighter without any conscious decision on his part.

Apparently, he wasn’t the only one either.

Noah cursed and tried to jerk his hand back, but he only succeeded in pulling Keegan off balance while both of their hands remained gripped to the wood.

“What the hell is happening?”

Keegan shook his head.

“I don’t know.” He whipped his head around to stare over his shoulder.

“Brie! Stop! Something’s wrong.”

She didn’t acknowledge him, and she didn’t stop.

But her cadence and inflection had changed, taking on a darker, more ominous note.

She had discarded her phone, leaving her standing in only moonlight and shadows, barely more than a silhouette beyond the flames.

“Brie, stop!” he yelled again.

He and Noah both pushed and pulled, trying to dislodge the talisman from their shared grasp.

Nothing they did made any difference.

“What now?” his brother asked.

Though he tried to sound flippant, Keegan could hear the thread of unease in his voice.

He could see the fear that flared in his eyes.

And there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

Before the guilt had even settled or taken root, the glowing sigils floated into the air, rising off the piece of wood to twine and swirl, forming a twisted ball of pulsing light.

“Well, that can't be good.”

The words had barely left Noah's mouth when the knotted cord began to unravel, stretching, reaching.

It slithered over their fingers and down their hands where it coiled around their wrists in matching cuffs.

They both cried out as the heat intensified, the light searing into their flesh and burning identical tattoos across their skin.

There was no discernable pattern, no images or symbols.

Just an intricate mosaic of interwoven lines that extended from their fingertips to their

elbows.

Though it felt like a lifetime, it couldn't have lasted more than a few seconds before abruptly coming to an end.

The swirling lights vanished, the heat dissipated, and the pain subsided.

The involuntary contractions in their muscles ceased, and their hands sprang open at the same time so that the talisman fell to the ground with a muffled thud.

"What the hell was that?" Noah demanded as he stretched his arm out to study the lines etched there.

Since Keegan was just as clueless, he turned to Brie for answers.

"I told you," she answered, stepping forward into the ring of light.

"It's a tether."

Noah sidestepped, placing himself between her and Keegan.

"A tether to what?"

Ignoring him, she held up a small, unremarkable pocketknife and dragged the blade across the pad of her thumb, dripping beads of scarlet onto the surface of the mirror.

Then she started chanting again, the words mumbled and unintelligible, but the effects were palpable.

Keegan's shoulders rounded as a heaviness settled over him, constricting his chest so that every breath felt like it was being inhaled through a straw.

The air within the circle became thick and cloying, and the temperature rose as the candlelight flared again.

The mirror sparked, emitting a series of pops and crackles, then erupted into a shower of purple and gold.

The tainted glass wobbled and swirled, glowing with a blinding light that grew in both size and intensity.

And throughout it all, Brie continued to chant.

Keegan gasped when he was jerked forward, his body moving without his permission, an unseen force dragging him toward the glowing mirror.

Beside him, Noah seemed to be having the same problem, his back bowing unnaturally as he fought against the pull.

“Noah, go! Get out of here!”

“Good idea,” his twin shot back, his tone a mixture of fear and sarcasm.

“Exactly how am I supposed to do that?”

A fair question, and one for which he didn’t have an answer.

The soles of his sneakers scuffed over the dirt, scattering dust and rocks across the ground.

Twisting at the waist, he stretched his arms out, reaching, straining, but no matter how much he resisted, he couldn’t stop his forward trajectory.

Then his feet were swept out from under him, the breath forced from his lungs in a pained grunt when he crashed to the ground.

Beside him, Noah dropped as well, his fingers scrabbling over the ground as they continued to be dragged through the dirt.

Keegan's heart throbbed in his chest, hammering out a tattoo against his ribs, the sound a constant pulse in his ears.

Adrenaline flooded his veins, his muscles trembling as his body vibrated with fear and panic.

Dread, cold and clawing, settled over him, and his stomach twisted with the realization that he was powerless to stop what was coming.

Worse, everything that had led him—and now, Noah—to this moment was entirely his fault.

His grief and pain hadn't blinded him.

He had seen the red flags, the inconsistencies, but he'd chosen to ignore them, to willfully allow emotion to override common sense and good judgment.

"The tether!" Noah yelled.

"We have to break the tether!"

"How?"

The enchantment used to bind them was already complete and seemingly absolute, literally seared into their skin.

Into their skin.

Keegan's breath caught, his mind suddenly still, clear.

With shaking hands, he frantically searched the ground, picking up and discarding stones, all of them either too small or too smooth.

Being dragged across the circle on his stomach didn't make the task any easier, but only a few feet from the mirror, he finally found what he'd been looking for.

Gripping the broken rock in a tight grip, he dragged the serrated edge over his opposite palm, slicing through both the skin and the lines burned there.

Blood beaded from the gash and pooled inside his hand before spilling over to splash against the ground.

The result was instant.

The magic surged inside him, the pressure building until it exploded outward in a concentration of glaring light.

Fire lanced up his spine, and his muscles contracted painfully as he was flung sideways, the force sending him tumbling through the dirt.

His vision dimmed and flickered, and a high-pitched whine rang in his ears.

Sprawled on his back, unable to move, he tried to call out for his brother, but the words became lodged in his throat.

He heard shouts, growls, and primal screeches, but it sounded hollow, distant—more like a dream than reality.

The sparkling light that glowed from the ancient mirror receded, retreating back into the warped glass where it was swallowed by the darkness.

Through blurry eyes, he watched as two shadowy figures were sucked into the swirling vortex, and when everything stopped with a final pop, he found himself alone in the circle of candles.

Bleeding, broken, he could do nothing but stare up at the sky, at the moon so bright it outshined the stars, and wait for the end.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:06 am

Chapter two

“W ho the hell cooks tuna in the microwave? The entire floor smells like fish!”

“I’d rather deal with the fish than have to listen to your screaming every night.”

“It’s not screaming! It’s throat singing!”

“I know throat singing, and that’s not it.”

“You’re one to talk. Banging on the walls at all hours of the night.”

“Both of you are annoying as hell, and I’m damn tired of the fish.”

Standing in the middle of the Tower’s eighth-floor corridor, Rune Calix dropped his head and rubbed the tension forming at his nape.

The residents closed in around him, their four-way argument escalating in both volume and creative insults.

It wasn’t even the first time he’d heard the complaints.

And since the length of time the souls had been in the Underworld directly correlated to which floor they lived on—the lower the floor, the longer they had been there—it was a very old disagreement.

The scent of warm tuna did indeed permeate the hallway from the unit directly behind

him.

Which he found kind of amusing.

Most of the souls who occupied the floor had departed the mortal world before surnames even existed.

Forget microwaves. Esther had definitely needed someone to teach her how to use a can opener at some point.

Jiro had been renovating his apartment for millennia.

Hence the late-night banging.

Since the spaces were magical in nature, however, it always reverted to its original layout come morning.

Still, he kept trying.

Dolma's singing was...

bad. And loud. And everyone knew it except her.

Then there was Sergei, the perpetually "over it" neighbor who just wanted everyone to shut up and leave him alone.

Rune could relate.

"Esther can eat what she wants," he said, raising his voice to be heard over the din.

"Light a candle or something."

He received a few grumbles, but since they had all heard the speech before, no one disputed him.

“Dolma, no throat singing after dinner. And maybe try lowering the volume.”

“I’m communing,” she muttered under her breath, even as she bobbed her head in understanding.

Who she thought she was communing with, he didn’t know, and he didn’t dare ask.

“Jiro...” He trailed off with a sigh, rubbing his fingers against his forehead as if he could iron away the headache forming there.

“Return the tools to Geoffrey.”

He made a mental note to stop by the blacksmith’s shop later to follow up.

He considered it a testament to how often his implements went missing that Geoffrey hadn’t even reported the incident this time.

Technically, no one had lodged a complaint against Sergei, but experience told him a little proactive scolding wouldn’t go amiss.

“Stop being a dick to everyone,” Rune told him.

“Don’t booby trap the corridor. The middle elevator doesn’t belong to you. Everyone can use it. No, I can’t relocate you.” He waved his hand to encompass the other residents and added, “I can’t relocate them either.” He glanced around the group with an arched eyebrow.

“We good here?”

They neither agreed nor disagreed.

They simply disappeared back into their units with huffs, grumbles, and one irritated growl from Sergei.

Honestly, probably the best outcome he could have hoped for.

Once the doors had closed, he waited for another minute, making sure all remained quiet before making his way to the bank of elevators.

Selecting the call button, he smirked when the doors of the middle lift immediately slid open.

Like a lot of things in the Underworld, he didn't know precisely how the Tower operated.

Rumor had it that Hades himself had built the structure to house the lost souls who refused to cross the river and face judgment.

Whether true or not, it seemed to him that the building had been constructed to be self-sustaining.

Over the many centuries, however, he had also come to believe that the Tower had a mind of its own, along with a whole lot of personality.

The inside of the cab looked like any he might find in the mortal realm.

Only, instead of a mirror, the back wall was comprised entirely of glass, giving him a view of the village beyond.

He wouldn't necessarily consider the cobbled streets and crooked huts in varying

degrees of disrepair a pleasant view.

Still, rather than gloomy or depressing, he found something oddly peaceful about the perpetual twilight that illuminated the town like clouded moonlight.

The doors parted again, opening onto a cavernous lobby, the space well-lit despite no obvious light source.

As he exited the cab, he couldn't help but glance at the row of primary-red phone boxes lined up along the back wall.

Even after twelve hundred years in the Underworld, he still didn't know what purpose they served.

He'd heard whispered speculations that ranged from summoning rituals to disembodied voice hauntings, and frankly, they all sounded ridiculous.

Not once in his countless passes through the lobby had he ever heard a phone ring or seen anyone approach the booths.

Which led him to believe that they didn't actually do anything.

The more likely explanation for their existence was purely for Hades' twisted amusement.

Outside of the Tower, he followed the winding path toward the main part of the village.

He passed a handful of residents along the way, and he spotted others through the dusty windows of the thatched huts.

Still, for a place that housed thousands of souls, it felt too empty.

Too quiet.

It hadn't always been like that, though.

When he had first arrived on the shores of the River Acheron, there had been absolute stillness.

Since he'd followed his prince into the Underworld through magical avenues rather than normal means—like death—he and his fellow Guardians hadn't been able to see or interact with the souls there.

Until they had been granted the sight by Hades.

For the first few hundred years, the Village of Lost Souls had been a lively place.

The streets had always been bustling with activity, with people packed into the ramshackle businesses, especially the pub and the diner.

Since then, he had seen the community wax and wane, watching the pendulum swing from boisterous to depressed and back again.

It had never been this bad, though.

While he would like to believe his presence had something to do with the emptiness, it would be both arrogant and factually inaccurate.

Well, not his presence specifically, but somewhere adjacent.

When Prince Orrin Nightstar had relocated to the Underworld to be with his mate, he

had taken up the mantle of Guardian of Lost Souls.

For the past millennia, it had been his job to connect with souls and help them move on, to leave the village and cross into the unknown.

He didn't want to diminish the importance of the position or undermine Orrin's success, but frankly, it wasn't enough.

For every soul the prince convinced to cross the river, two more arrived to take their place.

Hell, just the previous week, a new level had appeared in the Tower, a new floor of apartments to accommodate the growing population.

Over time, he had come to understand that everyone had their reasons for staying, but those justifications boiled down to just two things.

Love and fear. And while he understood the desire to give these souls choice and agency, he also felt that allowing them to stay stuck in time was more damaging than helpful.

Then again, what did he know?

He was just the guy who patrolled the riverbank and dealt with noise complaints.

Once a tactician and a warrior who defended kingdoms, he had been reduced to little more than a glorified neighborhood watchman.

To be fair, he didn't hate his life.

He hadn't fallen into the trap of existential despair like some of the souls.

Or Tyr.

Although, the Guardian's verve had seemingly been reawakened by the arrival of his mate.

At the very least, he had found his purpose again.

Rune just wished that purpose hadn't taken him across the river.

Damn, he missed the surly bastard.

But he had never really wavered in his own resolve.

His priorities had simply shifted.

He had adapted, and for the most part, he felt fulfilled.

He was just...tired.

At the end of the stone path, set slightly apart from the other shops, the diner welcomed him with squealing hinges and sand-strewn floors.

Maybe because it had been the first structure built on the hill, the place acted as something of a hub, the very heart of the village.

It had become Orrin's preferred meeting place, and long-time residents meandered through daily.

The newly deceased also found their way to the stone fireplace set just off the entrance, where they were welcomed with a cup of coffee and a kind word from the owner.

Orrin greeted him with a smile when he approached the booth situated next to the only window.

“Rune.” He shook back the sleeves of his sapphire blue robes and motioned to the bench seat across the table.

“Please, join me.”

“Have you ever considered dressing like the locals?” he asked, only half joking.

Darned in bright colors, with his fair skin and silver hair, the prince stood out like a ray of sunshine in a dark cave.

“I have.” Orrin nodded thoughtfully as he filled a chipped mug with freshly brewed coffee and slid it toward him.

“It would be disingenuous, though.”

He said nothing more on the subject, and honestly, he didn’t need to.

When he had renounced his claim to the throne of the elven court, the news had sent ripples throughout the paranormal world.

No one who knew him, however, had been surprised.

He had the skills and knowledge of a leader.

Maybe even the temperament.

He didn’t, however, have the heart or capacity to make the hard decisions.

Rune had no doubt that, given time, he would have become an excellent king.

But it never would have been authentic or sincere.

A male arrived at the table, fresh faced with rounded cheeks and untamed honey curls.

While Cian appeared young, he'd been in the village longer than anyone, the original lost soul, as it were.

At least, that was what people whispered about him.

He always wore an amiable smile when he greeted his customers, but it never quite reached his eyes.

Instead, they always looked a little lost.

Haunted.

“Can I get you anything?”

Rune shook his head.

“I’m good. Thanks.”

He wouldn’t say the food at the diner was bad.

Just bland. No matter the dish, it all kind of tasted like soggy cornflakes.

Cian smiled and dipped his head, then drifted away to resume his place behind the counter without another word.

Rune watched him go with a slight frown.

Everyone loved the guy, and for good reason, but interactions with him could sometimes be a little unsettling, feeling almost like residual energy, an echo, rather than any kind of meaningful connection.

“So, what brings you here?” Orrin asked, leaning back in the booth as he sipped his coffee.

“Nothing.”

Well, nothing he could articulate.

He had been headed to see the blacksmith when he’d left the Tower, and he wasn’t entirely sure how he had ended up in the diner.

At the same time, he felt like he was exactly where he was supposed to be.

The prince studied him over the rim of his cup, his pale gray eyes sharp and piercing.

“Problem at the high-rise?”

“Not really.” He shrugged.

“Same shit. Different day.” Holding his mug in both hands, he slouched against the back of the bench seat and sighed.

“Do you think those four will ever move on?”

Orrin considered him for a moment before echoing his sigh.

“No, I don’t think they will. They have been here too long. And while I wouldn’t call their existence comfortable, it is familiar.”

“How did I know you were going to say that?”

“Because you were thinking the same thing. You probably know the residents here better than anyone.”

Rune smirked.

On the surface, it might have sounded like a compliment, but he had known the elf for too long to be fooled.

Orrin wanted information.

“The new female, Cassidy, is already regretting her decision to stay.”

“I see.” Though he spoke in neutral tones, Orrin’s eyes lit up, and the hint of a smile played over his lips.

“And Ziggy?”

“Not happening.” He snorted at the very idea.

“The kid loves it here. He thinks he’s multilingual now.”

In reality, it was more like an enchanted translator.

Souls didn’t suddenly start speaking a variety of languages when they arrived in the Underworld.

The innate magic of the place just interpreted it for them.

Ziggy didn't care.

Nineteen, full of vim and vigor but lacking any shred of self-preservation, his cause of death had surprised literally no one, including him.

Still, taking a nosedive off a cliff in pursuit of a selfie sounded like a pretty brutal way to go.

"How are our long-time residents doing?" Orrin asked, taking another sip of his coffee.

"You might want to talk to Alice."

The shopkeeper at the pottery had lived in the village for centuries, and she'd always seemed pretty content.

Recently, however, something had changed.

Rune couldn't put his finger on it, but there was a restlessness about the female these days.

That didn't necessarily mean she was ready to move on, but it was worth a shot.

"I'll stop by the pottery later." Orrin angled slightly in his seat and glanced out the dingey window.

"What about Finn?"

Rune followed his gaze to the figure standing near the dock, his plain white tee a

stark contrast against the obsidian sands.

Newly dead and a fledgling vampire, Finn Truitt was a bit of a mystery.

Technically, he had died twice.

Once as a human and again as a vampire, but he had no recollection of the second one.

For the love of Hades, he hadn't even known he was a vampire when he'd first landed on the riverbank.

According to Cian, it used to happen a lot back before the Ministry of Otherling Affairs had existed to police the paranormal population.

Sometimes by accident from a clueless vampire.

More rarely, the final death had been intentional.

Yet the result was always the same.

A soul popped up in the Underworld with no knowledge of being an Otherling or any understanding of what that entailed.

Having lived through the Awakening—the big reveal of the paranormal world to humans—Finn had been a little better equipped to deal with his new reality.

His laid-back personality didn't hurt either, and for the most part, he had taken the news in stride.

Of both his death and his supernatural upgrade.

“He’s adjusting.” The guy struggled with urges and cravings, and he probably would for the next year or so, but he was learning to manage them.

“I think having something to do helps.”

With Tyr off across the river, living his happily ever afterlife with Sunne, it had disrupted the routine and fucked up the schedule of their shared duties.

Finn had volunteered to fill some of those gaps.

At the moment, he was patrolling the river, watching for any arriving souls so he could give them the rundown of what to do, and more importantly, what not to do.

“That’s good, but I still worry. Let me know if—”

Orrin cut off, and they both turned toward the window again.

A new soul had arrived.

Except, this one wasn’t confused or disoriented like the majority who came to their shores.

From the sound of his shouting, he was pissed.

Rune sighed. It happened sometimes.

That didn’t mean he enjoyed dealing with it.

“I better go check it out.” While he trusted Finn, the guy’s impulse control was already shaky at best, and things could go sideways fast.

Another high-pitched scream pierced the quiet, making his right eye twitch.

Orrin winced as well and inched toward the end of the booth.

“I’ll come with you.”

He didn’t argue, knowing a little magical backup couldn’t hurt, just in case.

Without warning, the world went black, and the air leached from his lungs.

The sensation lasted only a heartbeat, and when he blinked open his eyes, he found himself standing at the end of the pier.

“Thanks,” he muttered.

Fuck, he hated phasing, but he did appreciate the expediency.

“Where is he?” the newcomer shouted.

“I have to find him!”

Finn held his hands up in a placating gesture.

“Just calm down and—”

“Ugh!” Shoving past him, the male marched straight toward the river.

Thankfully, Finn moved faster, catching him around the waist and hauling him back from the water’s edge before he could permanently erase himself.

“Get your hands off me!” The guy kicked and flailed, doing his best to inflict as

much damage as possible.

“Let me go!”

“I’m trying to save your neck, you damn fool.”

When Finn’s face turned to stone after catching a heel to the knee, Rune figured he should probably intervene.

He had made it only a few steps when the newcomer jerked around and stilled, his wide hazel eyes locked on Rune across the distance.

His shaggy golden hair fell around his face like a halo, emphasizing a pair of high cheekbones and an angular jaw.

He was gorgeous, no doubt, but that hadn’t been what stopped Rune in his tracks.

“Noah?” He hadn’t seen the male in weeks, and he had kind of assumed the guy had slipped across the river in the middle of the night.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

The new arrival took a jerky step forward, his head tilting to one side.

“You know my brother?”

“Brother?” Okay, he had definitely missed something.

“What brother?”

“Noah. You called me Noah. Do you know him? Where is he?”

Rune growled.

He didn't know what the hell was happening, and he didn't like it.

“Who are you?”

“Keegan.” He took another step forward.

“Noah is my twin. I have to find him.”

Okay, well, that answered one question, and it made him feel a little less like he might be losing his mind.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much he could do to help the male.

“I'm sorry. I don't know where your brother is.” He gestured toward the dock behind him.

“If you take the ferry across the river, though, you might find him.”

“He's not on the other side of the river!” Keegan paused and shook his head.

“At least, I don't think he is.” He fisted both hands in his hair and pulled at the locks.

“I don't know! He's gone. He went through the mirror. And I know that sounds crazy, but you have to believe me.”

Honestly?

Yeah, he sounded batshit, and Rune didn't know what the hell to think or believe.

“I think you’re confused and—”

“I’m not confused!” Marching through the sand, he stopped right in front of Rune and poked a finger in his chest. “I’m telling the truth! I watched him get sucked into a mirror right before I died, and it’s my fault. I have to find him.”

But Rune wasn’t listening anymore.

The scent of honeysuckle and something wilder filled his head, the fragrance invading his senses.

Consuming him. Pumping adrenaline through his veins as his canines elongated and a deep, possessive growl rolled in his chest.

Nothing else made sense in that moment, but he knew one thing with absolute clarity.

For better or worse, this human, with his big eyes and outlandish stories, was undeniably his.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:06 am

Chapter three

K eegan frowned.

“Why are you growling at me?”

The low rumble stopped instantly, and the guy in front of him rubbed his eyes as if trying to wipe away a bad memory.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“I...I think we need to talk.”

Damn right they needed to talk.

He had to find Noah, and he couldn't do it on his own.

He didn't know exactly where he was, but since everyone kept talking about souls, ferries, and crossing rivers, he was pretty sure he'd died.

Which, yeah, that sucked, but he had bigger problems at the moment.

“No.” The pretty dude with the elongated ears stepped forward, looking like he'd stepped straight out of a Tolkien novel.

“This can't be happening.”

“Welcome to the club,” Keegan told him.

The guy ignored him.

“I thought we were past this? First Tyr, and now you?”

The giant with the sexy muscles and dark hair grumbled.

“It’s not like I planned it.”

“Do you know how many Guardians I’ve lost? All because they found their mates?”

“Two in twelve hundred years seems like pretty low statistics.”

“Rune!”

Keegan’s head sawed back and forth, going from one male to the other.

He had understood very little of that, but he had caught a couple key pieces of information.

“Mate? Do you mean me?” He should probably feel some kind of way about that, but his brain just sort of shrugged at the information.

While he didn’t subscribe to destiny in the sense that his entire path had been laid out for him since birth, he had always been a bit of a romantic.

The fact that he had never experienced love at first sight or soulmates hadn’t lessened his belief in their existence.

Was it strange? Yeah, a little.

But so was being dead.

And watching his twin get yanked through a ball of light and into a mirror.

“Yes,” Rune answered, his voice tight through clenched teeth.

“You don’t sound very happy about it.” Rude.

“It’s not that.”

“Then what is it? I’m really not crazy if that helps.”

“Maybe you should give him a compliment,” the guy in the white shirt advised.

“People like compliments.”

Keegan bobbed his head.

“Listen to the cowboy. He speaks truth.”

Rune glared at the other male for a long moment before deflating with a sigh.

“I don’t think you’re crazy.”

“Weird compliment, but I accept.”

Rune’s lips twitched, and though he clearly tried to fight it, he couldn’t stop the laughter that bubbled out of his mouth.

He had a great laugh, infectious, and the roguish smile made him look a hell of a lot less intimidating.

“I really am telling the truth,” Keegan said, bending his elbows and holding both of his arms up in front of him.

“See?”

Warmth bloomed across his skin when Rune took his wrist, and a shiver raced through him where the male’s thumb caressed the faded white lines, remnants of the spell.

Then goosebumps broke out over his arms, but to be fair, that could have been from the biting cold.

“Who did this?”

It wasn’t just a question.

He spoke it like a threat, and Keegan kind of loved that.

Sure, it probably didn’t make him a very good person, but after what Brie had done to him and Noah, he didn’t give a damn.

“Maybe we should move this conversation somewhere more private.” The elf glanced up the hill toward a row of dilapidated shacks with crooked chimneys.

“We should return to the castle.”

Of course he had a castle because.

..why not? “I’m sorry, who are you?”

“Keegan, this is Orrin Nightstar,” Rune answered in the elf’s stead.

“That’s Finn Truitt.” He jerked his head toward the male standing to their left.

“And I’m Rune Calix.”

He nodded at each male in turn.

“It’s nice to meet you. Sorry I kind of spazzed out.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Rune assured him.

Finn snorted. “I have a knee that begs to differ.”

Rune shot him a cold look.

“You’ll live.”

“The fact that I’m a dead vampire kind of disproves your theory, friend.”

Biting his bottom lip, Keegan turned his head to hide his smile.

He was still worried about Noah, still desperate to find him, but their petty bickering helped calm something inside him.

It provided a distraction, a respite from his racing thoughts, giving him a moment of stillness so he could think without panic.

Suddenly, everything went dark, the breath squeezed from his lungs, and it felt like he’d been sucked through a garden hose.

His ears rang, his stomach heaved, and his skin felt stretched too tight.

Not painful exactly, just uncomfortable, and when the world came rushing back, he stood in front of a castle made of white stone.

A narrow path, lined on both sides by lemon trees and illuminated with fairy lights, led to a set of double doors with a bronze knocker that looked like some hell beast.

Carved gargoyles perched on the turrets, each wearing a different ghastly expression, while a bouquet of colorful flowers surrounded a small koi pond.

Twisted brambles grew on either side of the wide portico, but a thick mat welcomed them—along with a reminder to wipe their “paws.”

It was such a strange mixture of aesthetics that Keegan didn’t know what the hell to think.

Something of his thoughts must have shown on his face, though, because Rune rested a hand on his shoulder and chuckled.

“Once you meet Orrin’s mate, it’ll make more sense.”

“Unfortunately, that will have to wait,” Orrin informed them with a wistful little sigh.

“Erus left this morning. I don’t know when he’ll return.”

“I’m sorry.” Of course, he’d had nothing to do with that, but it seemed like the right thing to say.

“Did you meet him here in...this place?”

“The Underworld.” Rune’s hand slid up his back to settle on his nape with a gentle squeeze.

“This is the Underworld. And you would know Orrin’s mate as Cerberus.”

Keegan’s eyes rounded, and his face split into a wide grin.

“Oh, you mean like the Guardian of the Underworld? That’s cool.” His smile faltered when everyone stopped and turned to stare at him.

“Um, did I say something wrong?”

After a heartbeat, Orrin chuckled and shook his head.

“Erus is going to love you. Everyone always asks if he’s a three-headed dog.”

So...

he wasn’t a three-headed dog?

Not even a shifter?

He laughed nervously.

“Mortals, am I right?”

Orrin fell into step on his other side as they neared the wide steps that led to the door.

“No, I didn’t meet him here, and there’s no need to be sorry. He’ll be back. It’s just that time is...different where he’s going.”

“Like space? You know, like how an hour on one planet might be years on Earth?”

“Something like that, yes.”

The double doors swung open without a sound as they climbed the stone steps, and the scent of garlic and tomatoes wafted across the threshold.

Keegan lifted his head to sniff at the breeze, then instantly pulled back and wrinkled his nose.

“Um, is something burning?”

“Sindri,” the rest of the group answered as one.

As if that was supposed to mean something to him.

Apart from the acrid scent of something blackened that definitely shouldn’t be, he detected the fragrance of vanilla and leather when he entered the castle.

Mixed with a hint of sweet cigar smoke, it brought to mind old-timey parlors where men sat around in tailcoats, sipping cognac and discussing their recent travels.

His eyes widened when Rune led him into a grand foyer, an immense space with marble floors that gleamed under the soft glow of an ornate chandelier.

Colorful tapestries depicting scenes of ancient, mythical battles adorned the walls, the gold and silver threads twinkling in the light.

They passed a wide, curving staircase that spiraled toward the upper floor, its banister carved with intricate designs of vines and leaves.

Entering an expansive corridor lined with beautiful oil paintings in gold frames, he pressed close to Rune’s side, swiveling his head as he tried to take in everything at once.

Eventually, the hallway opened into a large sitting room with high ceilings and walls painted a soft cream.

Plush suede furniture in deep blues had been centered around a stone fireplace, and a grand piano occupied the corner, its polished surface reflecting the flickering flames.

Shelves filled with leather-bound books lined one wall, while the opposite wall showcased a collection of exotic artifacts and archaic weapons.

Just inside the entryway, Rune stopped and stepped away from him.

“I’ll be right back.”

Keegan stiffened, his heart fluttering with anxiety at being separated from him.

Rationally, he knew it didn’t make sense.

They had just met, and he didn’t know a damn thing about the guy, but he felt safe with him.

Still, he didn’t want to sound like a clingy mess, so he bit the inside of his cheek and forced himself to nod.

Rune’s eyes softened, and he guided him toward the sofa nearest the fireplace.

“Sit here where it’s warm. I promise I’ll only be a minute.”

Nodding again, he settled onto the end cushion and held his hands out toward the flames, soaking in the warmth.

From the moment he had arrived, he’d been running on adrenaline and nerve, so

while he'd noticed the cold, he had barely registered it on a conscious level.

Now that he had a moment to breathe, however, he couldn't stop shaking.

As promised, Rune returned only a moment later, carrying a cream-colored fleece blanket.

Unfolding it, he draped it over Keegan's shoulders and tucked it around him before taking a seat beside him on the couch.

Finn flopped down on the sofa opposite them, and Orrin perched in a wingback chair that looked suspiciously like a throne.

For a long time, no one spoke, the silence growing thick and heavy until Keegan couldn't take it any longer.

"Look, I know what I sound like, and I know you have no reason to believe me, but I swear I'm telling the truth."

"I believe something happened," Orrin responded, templing his index fingers and pressing them to his lips.

"I was magically branded, and my brother got sucked into a fucking mirror. That's what happened. I'm not lying!"

"Easy," Rune murmured, taking his hand and cradling it in his own much larger one.

"No one is accusing you of anything. Why don't you start at the beginning?"

Lacing their fingers together, he squeezed tightly and took several deep breaths to steady himself.

No one was going to believe him, let alone help him, if he started raving like a madman.

“My brother died.”

“In a car accident,” Rune added.

“It would have been a few months ago for you, right?”

He frowned at the “for you” part but dipped his head.

“You really know Noah?”

“Not well, but yes.”

“So, he didn’t...move on? Cross over?” He waved his free hand.

“You know, whatever it’s called.”

“No, he didn’t move on. He seemed to be waiting on something.” A smile curved Rune’s mouth as he traced his thumb back and forth over the lines on the back of Keegan’s hand.

“Or someone.”

Keegan grinned fondly.

Yeah, that sounded like Noah.

Idiot.

If asked, they would both vehemently deny any codependency, but they did have that almost mythical twin bond everyone talked about.

He just hadn't realized how deeply rooted it went until he'd lost it.

"What happened next?" Rune prodded.

He told them about meeting Brie and all of her false promises.

The cliffs that overlooked the ocean.

The tethering enchantment that had bound him to his twin.

The blood ritual, and finally, the glowing mirror.

"So, I cut my hand. I thought maybe if I severed the lines, I could sever the connection." It had been sheer dumb luck that it had actually worked.

"There was a big blast of energy. Maybe magic?" He shook his head.

"I couldn't move, but I swear I saw Brie and Noah go through that swirly portal thing. Then it just disappeared."

It sounded insane, even to him.

Still, he knew what he'd seen.

It hadn't been a dream or a hallucination.

Noah had really been pulled into that mirror.

After outlining the entire story from beginning to end, he also realized how incredibly stupid and naïve he'd been to trust Brie, but there wasn't much he could do about that now.

"Then this Reaper lady showed up dressed like an undertaker, and I tried to tell her, but she didn't really seem all that interested." Leaning heavily against Rune's side, he lifted one shoulder in a lopsided shrug.

"And here I am."

He expected skepticism and eyerolls.

Maybe even a couple of dismissive snorts.

No one was laughing.

Rune stroked his hair back from his face, then gripped his chin, tilting his head up until he was forced to meet the male's gaze.

Eyes the color of the Caribbean Sea stared back at him, penetrating, searching.

"I'm sorry to ask this, but I need to know," Rune said.

"Where did you die? And I need you to be specific."

"Deadman's Cove in Washington State. It's in Cape Disappointment State Park."

The words continued to tumble around in his mind, even after he'd spoken them out loud.

The longer he dwelled, the funnier it became, until a deranged giggle burst from his

lips.

Of course he'd died in a place called Deadman's Cove.

And yes, the entire experience had been utterly disappointing.

Then Orrin was on his feet, his elegant robes transforming into a pair of form-fitting leather pants with a smoke-gray tunic and a pair of soft boots that laced up to his knees.

His long, silvery-white hair that had hung loosely around his shoulders twisted itself into a braid that reached the middle of his back, accentuating the slight curl at the tips of his ears.

Rune glanced back and forth between him and Keegan, his expression a mask of concern and indecision.

"Stay with your mate," Orrin said, a note of command in his voice.

"I'll take Sindri."

"What's happening?" Keegan asked.

The guy looked like he was ready to go to war.

"Where are you going?"

"To retrieve the artifacts. I've never heard of something like this, but hopefully, they'll tell us more." Then he vanished from the room.

Finn followed, quietly, discreetly, walking rather than simply poofing out of

existence.

Alone with his mate, Keegan stared up at him, his eyes stinging with unshed tears.

“Does this mean you believe me?”

Cradling his cheek, Rune swept a thumb under his eye and smiled.

“I believe you, kaelaer .”

Although he didn’t know what the word meant, or even what language it derived from, he felt the weight of the endearment.

It surrounded him, cradled him, filling him with the first ray of hope since the entire mess had started.

The longer he spent with Rune, the closer he wanted to be to him, that initial shrug of acceptance slowly morphing into something deeper, more instinctual.

If he, as a human, was already sensing the threads of fate weaving together, he could only imagine how intensely Rune felt it.

Yet, he looked so calm, so in control.

Keegan felt anything but.

“Thank you.”

“We’re going to figure out what happened and help your brother. In the meantime, you should try to get some rest.”

“I—can I—I mean...” He trailed off, the words stuck in his throat.

“You can ask me anything,” Rune assured him as he stroked the back of his hand down Keegan’s cheek.

“What is it?”

Leaning into the touch, he took a deep breath and forced the words out in a rush.

“Can I stay with you?”

“I insist.”

He sagged into Rune’s arms, his muscles unknotting and his body going limp from exhaustion and relief.

“Thank you.”

A quiet growl vibrated in his mate’s chest. “You don’t have to thank me. Ever.”

“I kind of do.”

Rune growled again, but he sounded exasperated rather than angry.

“Come on. Let’s get you cleaned up and into some warmer clothes.”

“Yes, please.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Starving.” Which seemed kind of wrong.

Being dead wasn't anything like he expected it to be.

“Okay, after you shower, we'll see if we can salvage whatever the fuck Sindri did in the kitchen.”

“Can we sit here a little longer? Just a few minutes?” Right then, it felt like Rune was the only thing holding him together.

Settling against the back of the sofa, Rune wrapped both arms around him, pulling him close and holding him against his broad chest. “Rest, kaelaer. I'm not going anywhere.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:06 am

Chapter four

Rune's entire life had been built on a foundation of rules and order.

He enjoyed schedules, routines, and patterns.

He preferred predictability over chaos.

More importantly, he liked being prepared for any eventuality.

As a member of Orrin's Guard, those traits had served him well as the team's strategist. He had been valued and praised for always having the answers, for devising backup plans for his backup plans.

None of that mattered when it came to Keegan Marsh.

This time, he didn't have the answers.

He saw no obvious course of action.

Hell, he didn't even know what would happen in the next heartbeat, let alone in the days, weeks, or years to come.

In that moment, he just knew that everything had changed.

It wasn't logical. The emotions that warred inside him didn't fit into a neat dataset or align with rational thought.

Instead, he rode a wave of pure instinct, everything he thought he knew about himself stripped away and rebuilt to place Keegan at the center of his new reality.

A reality that apparently included magic mirror portals.

It sounded like something out of a fairy tale, but his belief in Keegan was sincere.

Just because he hadn't witnessed something with his own eyes didn't negate its existence.

And just because he didn't understand it didn't mean it wasn't possible.

An hour ago, he would have denied any desire to burn the world to the ground to protect a single person, especially one he'd just met.

In his mind, it would have been absurd, an impossibility.

He'd have been wrong.

Did it make sense for him to be standing guard outside the bathroom door while Keegan showered?

No. None at all.

Did the realization matter?

Also no.

Until he had eyes on his mate again, he had no plans of moving from his current position.

Since both dwellings had been constructed by Hades, the castle and the Tower operated in similar ways.

The main difference being that Orrin's home had been a gift designed for luxury, while the units at the Tower served more practical purposes.

Still, both places existed to provide the occupants with what they needed, always changing and adjusting to the circumstances.

Keegan had asked to stay with him, but he hadn't specified in what capacity.

As such, Rune hadn't wanted to be presumptuous, so instead of his own bed, he'd offered him the room next to his.

The castle had compensated for his lack of confidence by creating a door between the adjoining spaces.

Nothing quite like being judged by a fucking pile of stones.

Eventually, Keegan emerged from the en suite, his skin pinkened from the hot water, and his damp hair a couple of shades darker.

Upon spotting Rune, he stumbled to a stop at the threshold, his eyes round with an odd mixture of confusion and relief.

"Hey. Thanks for the clothes."

His voice was quiet, unsure, and he smiled shyly as he tugged at the hem of his long-sleeved thermal Henley.

Paired with black cotton pants, the white top complemented his skin tone, and the

neckline emphasized his prominent collarbones.

Both pieces of clothing fit him well, and he looked stunning, but Rune couldn't take credit.

Along with the adjoining door, the castle had taken it upon itself to make Keegan feel at home.

His new room boasted a queen-sized bed covered in thick blankets, plush area rugs spread across the marble floors, his own fireplace, and a basic wardrobe.

The sleep set had been waiting for them, folded neatly on the foot of the bed.

He didn't know if the clothes and décor were black and white because Keegan liked the color scheme, or if it was more of a blank slate until the castle learned his preferences.

From what he had observed, the palette didn't really fit his mate's vibrancy, but then again, he was getting used to being proven wrong.

"Come on, I'll show you the kitchen."

On instinct, he held his hand out, his chest swelling with satisfaction when Keegan took it without hesitation.

Resting his other hand on Rune's forearm, he leaned into his side, clinging to him like he worried one of them might disappear if he didn't hold on tight.

It was sweet, a little sad, and completely unnecessary.

Still, Rune couldn't deny that a part of him enjoyed it.

“Why do you live in a castle?” Keegan asked as they made their way down the corridor to the curved staircase.

“Hades built it for Orrin when he moved here.”

Keegan pursed his lips, and his brow wrinkled adorably.

“So, if Orrin didn’t always live here, does that mean he wasn’t always the Guardian of Lost Souls?”

“Correct. Before he mated Erus—”

“Who is very much not a three-headed dog.”

Rune chuckled, both in amusement and solidarity.

Yeah, that one had taken him a while to wrap his mind around as well.

“Right again. But before Erus, Orrin was a prince, heir to the—”

“Elven court!” Keegan’s head jerked up, his eyes shining and a bright smile curving his lips.

“I knew I recognized the name. I just couldn’t place it at first.”

After everything he’d been through, Rune wouldn’t have faulted him if he had forgotten his own name.

“So, are you one of his Guardians?”

“I am.”

Technically, he still held the title, even if his duties had changed and Orrin didn't need his protection anymore.

He just didn't know for how much longer.

"That means you're a shifter, right?" Keegan's cheeks flushed, and his hand tightened around Rune's.

"Sorry if that's rude."

Some Otherlings took offense to the question, but he'd never seen the point.

Even with all the information available to him—scent, energy signatures, chemosignals—he couldn't always discern what type of shifter someone was.

For a human, it would be virtually impossible to tell a shifter from a werewolf, or a faerie from a pixie.

"Yes and no. I'm a bear shifter, but my mother was a mage, which makes me a little...more."

"Like being more powerful and harder to kill." It wasn't a question.

"We learned about Guardians in our Otherling Studies course back in high school."

Rune frowned.

"They teach that in schools now?"

"Only in a few places. It's mandatory in a handful of states, and it was an elective at my school."

“And what did you learn in this course?”

“Not much.” Keegan shrugged.

“It was pretty lame actually.”

Rune chuckled.

Somehow, that didn’t surprise him.

Most Otherlings knew little about the history and culture of the different races within their own community.

They certainly didn’t know enough to teach it to humans.

“Can I ask you something?”

Rune nodded.

“You can ask me anything.”

“What did Orrin mean about losing Guardians to mates?”

The list of requirements for becoming a Guardian of the paranormal royal families was a short one.

Apart from passing the intense training, they had to be of a mixed lineage that included magic and the ability to shapeshift.

They didn’t have to be spellcasters.

They just needed to have inherited enough magic to make them bigger, stronger, faster, and possess the ability to heal in real time.

The only other condition was a lack of emotional ties that might interfere with their oath to always put their charges first. This even applied to family, including parents and siblings.

Mostly, however, the rule had been implemented to exclude mated Otherlings from becoming Guardians.

He had honestly never given the reason behind it much thought beyond what he'd been taught during training.

It had been an abstract concept, something that didn't apply to him, and therefore, didn't require more than a cursory understanding.

Now, however, he knew exactly why the decree existed.

To be a Guardian meant unwavering loyalty.

It meant always putting the families they protected first.

Rune couldn't do that, not anymore.

He respected Orrin, loved him like a brother, but the prince was no longer his priority.

Instead of explaining all of that, however, he offered a more expedient—and humorous—answer.

“It's kind of an inside joke that Orrin is something of a mate magnet. He's had to

replace so many Guardians because of it.” He shook his head and chuckled.

“There was one who met their mate five minutes after arriving at the palace.”

“No.”

“Yes.” The look on Orrin’s face had been priceless.

“Three of us followed him to the Underworld. Tyr met his mate a couple of months ago.”

“Oh, my god. You’re kidding.”

Fuck, he had the sweetest laugh, and he looked like an angel when he smiled.

The coming days wouldn’t be easy as they tried to unravel the mystery of what had happened to him and his brother.

Still, Rune made a silent vow to give him a reason to look that happy as often as he could.

When they arrived in the kitchen, they found Finn seated at the center island, his face illuminated by the glow of the tablet screen clutched between his hands.

“Anything?” Rune asked him.

“Not a damn thing.” Sighing, Finn turned off the device and pushed it across the granite countertop.

“No body. No one has even reported me missing.”

He winced in sympathy, but the information didn't surprise him.

"As far as the mortal world is concerned, it's been barely more than an hour since you died."

"Yeah, you're right. I just don't like not knowing."

"Fair enough."

"Well, I understood exactly none of that," Keegan interjected.

"Someone want to explain it to the new kid? Does this have something to do with the time stuff Orrin was talking about?"

"Sort of." Orrin had been referring to an entirely different part of the Underworld that existed outside of both time and space.

But for the purpose of the current discussion, he wasn't wrong.

"A day here is about a minute, give or take, topside."

"Wait, so I've been here for about an hour. That means..." Keegan held his hands up and muttered under his breath as he bent his fingers one by one.

"Never mind. I suck at math."

Rune snorted, unable to hide his amusement.

"You died a couple of seconds ago."

"Wait, really?" His eyebrows drew together to form a crease across his forehead, and

his mouth twisted as if he had tasted something bitter.

“That’s kind of fucked up. I mean, a good doctor could probably get me breathing again.”

He wouldn’t lie.

Mistakes had happened.

And watching a soul forcibly dragged from the Underworld to be reunited with their body wasn’t something he ever wanted to witness again.

While he would love nothing more than for his mate to have a second chance, to be alive and thriving, he didn’t want to give him false hope.

Considering his manner of death, it seemed unlikely that science alone would be able to revive him.

“Call Orrin,” Keegan demanded.

“Tell him to try CPR.”

“I…” Rune didn’t even know what to say.

That wasn’t how any of this worked.

“I can’t do that. I don’t even have a phone.”

“There’s a tablet right there.” He jabbed his finger at the counter.

“Send a text.”

While the castle was the only place on that side of the river where magic and technology existed together, it was a one-way connection.

They could access information, but they couldn't connect or interact with the mortal world.

They couldn't even send messages between devices inside the castle, let alone across dimensions.

"Can't or won't? Do you want me to be dead?"

A thread of panic lanced through him as he fumbled for something to say that wouldn't make him sound like a complete dick.

Of course, he didn't want his mate to be dead, but if he hadn't died, they wouldn't have met.

And for that, he couldn't be sorry.

Then Keegan started to laugh.

A mischievous little giggle that rounded his cheeks and made his shoulders bounce.

"Relax, Rune. I'm just messing with you."

The breath whooshed from his lungs, and his muscles slowly unknotted.

"I'm sorry, kaelaer . If I could change it—"

"No, I get it. I mean, it's not how I planned to end my weekend, but it could be worse." His smile faded, and his voice softened until he spoke barely above a

whisper.

“I could have ended up in the mirror, too.”

There were no assurances Rune could give that wouldn't sound like baseless platitudes.

So, instead of trying, he pulled Keegan into his arms and stroked his damp hair, lending him whatever strength he needed until the storm passed.

“I'm okay,” he insisted, but he didn't pull away.

Turning his head, he rested his ear over Rune's heart, his gaze focused on Finn.

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make that all about me. You were saying something about a missing person?”

The cowboy waved away his apology with a genial smile, and Rune sent him a nod of gratitude.

“I've been trying to figure out how I died, but it seems like no one even knows I'm toes up yet.” He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

“I reckon Rune's right. I just need to be patient.” Then he swiveled around on the barstool and slapped his hands down on top of his thighs.

“Anyway, enough bellyaching. You're probably hungry.”

“I could eat.”

“The chicken is dry but edible, and there's a salad in the fridge.” He slid off the stool

and rounded the island.

“I’d skip the spuds, though.”

Picking up the saddest looking potato Rune had ever seen—black, shriveled, and crumbling—he knocked it against the countertop.

The hollow thud echoed through the room, and flakes of burnt peel scattered across the granite.

After twelve hundred years, it seemed only reasonable to think that Sindri’s cooking would have improved, but he was still a menace in the kitchen.

He enjoyed it, though, and no one else wanted the job, so they rarely complained.

Keegan snorted and shook his head.

“I really have to meet this guy.”

“Meet who?” came a familiar voice from the entryway of the kitchen.

“Hey, stop abusing the potatoes.”

“Too late for that,” Finn shot back.

“What temperature did you set the oven at? Hellfire?”

“Suck it, vampire boy.” Laughing at his own joke, Sindri Ohlson strode into the kitchen and came to a stop directly in front of Rune and his mate.

“You must be Keegan.”

“I am.” He held his hand out in offering.

“You must be Sindri.”

Over six feet tall and built like a tank, the Guardian looked intimidating.

Until he opened his fucking mouth.

“How’d you know? Is it the hair?” He threaded his fingers through his long, golden locks and flipped them to one side.

“It’s the hair, isn’t it?”

Rune rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t be too exasperated when the banter elicited another one of those sweet laughs from his mate.

“What did you find?” he asked, trying to get the Guardian to focus.

Sindri turned to him with a shrug.

“Some stick and a broken mirror. Orrin is putting them in the safe now.”

“Does he know what it is?”

“Nope. He says we’ll have to wait for Erus to get back.”

“Did you see my body?” Keegan asked before Rune could formulate his next question.

The shifter shrugged again.

“Sure. Why do you ask?”

“How did I look?”

“Uh, normal?”

Keegan bobbed his head, his expression thoughtful.

“I didn’t pee myself, did I?”

“Not that I noticed, but I wasn’t really staring at your crotch.”

A growl vibrated in Rune’s chest, spilling from his mouth before he could stop it.

Jealousy was not an emotion he was accustomed to, especially not over something so ridiculous, but it seemed to be a night for firsts.

Sindri seemed confused rather than offended by his outburst. Then, a moment later, his expression cleared, and a smile split his lips.

“Oh, right. You two are in it to win it.” He wagged a finger between Rune and Keegan.

“Congrats.”

Rune pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed.

“What about Hades?”

“What about him?”

“Where is he?” he asked through clenched teeth.

He loved his little Underworld family.

Really, he did. Sometimes, however, he wanted to throttle them.

“With Erus.”

Fantastic.

“What about Elliot?”

Keegan tilted his head.

“Who’s Elliot?”

“The God of Death,” he answered absently.

“The God of Death is named Elliot?” His mate snorted out a laugh.

“You have to be fucking with me.”

“Cross my heart,” Sindri answered, drawing an X over his chest. “You’ll like him. He’s a chill dude.” His gaze flittered back to Rune.

“He’s not here, though. He went with Erus and Hades.”

Oh, for the love of everything unholy.

Where the hell was a god when he needed one?

“So, what now?” Keegan asked, his voice thready with anxiety.

“We just wait until they get back?”

Rune ran a hand through his hair, a growl rumbling in his throat.

He didn’t like it any more than Keegan did, but they had exhausted their options.

“We could try the library,” he said at last. “There might be something about mirror spells there.”

“Yes.” Keegan grabbed his hand, his face alight with hope.

“Let’s do that.”

It was a long shot, and he couldn’t make any guarantees, but at least action—any action—felt better than standing still.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:06 am

Chapter five

Tucked into the south wing, hidden behind a set of enormous, square-arched doors, the castle library felt like stepping into another world.

Or maybe another period in time.

Cavernous, with cathedral ceilings and natural stone tiles, every step echoed throughout the room.

Every hushed breath or gentle page turn resonated with an eerie hollowness.

Thousands of books lined the walls, stacked tidily into recessed bookshelves.

All except for one stretch of space on the upper gallery that bowed outward, as if the library itself had taken a deep breath and never exhaled.

Veiled in muted earth tones, the only splashes of color came from leather-wrapped spines, their titles embossed in gold foil.

Above the swell, soft, silvery light filtered through the triple panes of the crown-shaped window, blanketing the room in a sort of gloomy academia.

And for the past week, it had been the backdrop of Keegan's afterlife.

He ate at the mahogany coffee table in front of the fireplace, a fork in one hand and a book in the other.

He napped on the velvet settee.

He pored over words in languages he couldn't read, in subjects he didn't understand, until his eyes crossed and his temples throbbed.

"This is pointless."

Slamming closed a heavy tome wrapped in burgundy leather, he crossed his arms and glared at the offending cover.

The title, *A Reflection of Magic*, had sounded promising, but it had nothing to do with mirror spells.

Rather, it had turned out to be little more than a soapbox thesis on the morality and ethics of magic.

Seated directly across from him at the long table, Rune looked up from his own reading.

"Let's take a break."

"I don't need a break," he snapped.

"I need answers."

As soon as the words left his mouth, he regretted them.

Rune had been right there beside him all week, just as devoted to finding answers.

When he'd had every reason to give up on the fool's errand, he'd stayed.

Not because of duty, but because it mattered to Keegan.

“I’m sorry.” Leaning forward, he reached across the table to grip his mate’s hand.

“I didn’t mean to take it out on you.”

“You’re going to have to try a lot harder than that to hurt my feelings.” A crooked smile curved one side of his mouth as he rubbed his thumb over the back of Keegan’s hand.

“I’m not telling you to give up, kaelaer. I’m saying take a break.”

He understood what his mate meant, but it still felt like giving up.

Like he wasn’t doing enough.

For all he knew, Noah was dead-dead.

Utterly, totally, erased from existence like the souls who touched the waters from the River Acheron.

Before he had been made aware of the dangers, he had almost met the same fate.

Just the thought of what could have happened still sent a chill through him.

Without him, who would save his brother?

He also felt guilty for kicking Finn.

In general, but more specifically, for assaulting the vampire when he had only been trying to save him from himself.

They really should post a sign at the dock or something.

Yet, while he had no evidence that Noah had survived and ended up somewhere horrible, the idea lingered, infecting him and festering like an open wound.

And wherever he had gone, he was trapped there alongside a raging psychopath with just enough understanding of magic to make her dangerous.

So, yes, resting felt like failure.

Worse, it felt like betrayal.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not. You’re exhausted.” Pushing away, Rune rose to his feet and rounded the end of the table.

“Come on,” he urged, holding his hand out.

“The world won’t implode if you close your eyes for ten minutes.”

With a resigned sigh, he took the lifeline, gripping Rune’s hand and allowing himself to be led away from the table to the seating area by the fireplace.

Instead of the plush sofa, however, Rune lowered himself into one of the oversized armchairs with a rounded back and high sides.

Confused but accepting, Keegan turned, intending to find his own place to curl up, but his mate caught him by the wrist, toppling him right into the shifter’s lap.

Rune repositioned him easily, turning him so that his thighs straddled the male’s hips

and his knees pressed into the chair cushion.

“What are you doing?”

Not that he minded.

They had been dancing around each other all week with soft touches and looks that lingered a little too long.

Keegan wanted more. He craved it.

He just didn’t know how to ask for it.

“I’m going to tell you something, and I need to make sure you hear it.”

His pulse immediately spiked, and his mouth turned arid as his stomach clenched with apprehension.

Whatever it was, he already knew he didn’t want to hear it, but he didn’t exactly have a choice either.

He nodded.

“What happened to Noah wasn’t your fault.”

Okay, not what he had expected, but neither was it true.

“You’re wrong. If I had just left well enough alone, none of this would have happened.”

Resting his hands on Keegan’s hips, Rune squeezed, gently kneading the flesh as he

studied him.

“Tyr took a bullet to the eye once while protecting Orrin.”

“Oh, my god!”

He had no idea what that had to do with him, Noah, or the man in the moon.

But while he didn’t know the Guardian apart from the stories he’d heard, he wouldn’t wish that on anyone.

Rune lifted a hand, waving away his concern.

“It grew back.”

He made it sound like a regular Tuesday at the office.

As if the fact that it had healed in any way lessened the trauma of being shot in the face.

Furthermore, he still didn’t know what point Rune was trying to make.

“Orrin blamed himself for a long time.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Exactly.”

Keegan huffed and rolled his eyes.

“It’s not the same thing.” He extended his index finger and poked himself in the

chest. “I’m the one that said yes. To the sketchy meeting in the middle of the night. To the summoning ritual. To the tether.” He jabbed himself again, harder this time.

“I’m the one who dragged Noah into this!”

“Or,” Rune said, his tone sharp and unyielding.

“This female found you. Preyed on you. Used your grief to manipulate you by offering you the one thing no one could say no to.”

“But I let her,” he shot back, his nostrils flaring and his eyes stinging.

“If I hadn’t been so weak, no—”

His words ended in a gasp when Rune grabbed the back of his neck and brought their mouths together in a kiss filled with quiet authority.

It wasn’t demanding or possessive, just a light whisper, but for some reason, that simple touch was what finally broke him.

The tears he fought back spilled over to track down his cheeks, and his lips parted in a quiet sob.

Rune didn’t pull away, though.

He didn’t coddle him.

He just swallowed down every hitch and hiccup as he traced the seam of Keegan’s mouth with his tongue.

It was comfort and longing mixed with a gentle promise, and he clung to it, drowned

in it.

Wrapping his arms around Rune's neck, he leaned into him, giving himself over to the feelings coursing through him.

Rune growled his approval and wound an arm around his waist, surrounding him in strength and steadiness as he deepened the kiss, pillaging the depths of Keegan's mouth.

"You aren't weak," Rune murmured to him when they finally broke apart.

"But you don't always have to be strong either. You can lean on me."

He wanted that, and it sounded great in theory, but for how long?

At what point did the newness wear off and all those soft feelings turn to bitterness and resentment?

When did his problems become burdens rather than riddles to be solved?

"I just don't want to annoy you."

"I won't patronize you by telling you that won't happen. We're probably going to piss each other off, and things aren't always going to be easy. I don't have any problem speaking my mind, though, and from what I've observed, neither do you."

Keegan chuckled wetly and wiped at his eyes.

"That sounds pretty accurate."

"I may not always like what you have to say, but I still want to hear it." Gripping

Keegan's jaw, he urged his head up, waiting for him to meet his gaze before he continued.

"You seem to be under the misassumption that this is temporary." A growl slipped into his voice, and his beautiful blue eyes flared with golden light.

"It's not."

Then he sealed the vow with another kiss, this one harder, more forceful, the kind that simultaneously tamed and consumed.

It was rough, demanding, and filled with natural dominance that earned submission rather than demanded it.

The type of kiss that screamed of possession and left Rune's name branded across his soul.

"You are mine, kaelaer ." His mate's eyes flashed again, shining with an ethereal glow, making him look like a dark, vengeful god.

"Not mine for now. Not mine for a little while. Mine ."

The confident tone resonated deep within him, igniting a part of his psyche driven by pure instinct, and he shivered as the weight of the words settled over him.

"I believe you," he panted, his hands shaking and his heart throbbing in his throat.

"I believe you."

He wanted to say more, to stake his own claim, but before the thoughts could fully form, something caught his attention from the corner of his eye.

Lifting his head, he stared over Rune's shoulder and frowned, unsure of what he was seeing.

It wasn't fog or smoke.

Just...darkness. It seeped into the library, bleeding across the walls and swallowing everything in its path.

Impenetrable and absolute, it extinguished every source of light, leaving only emptiness in its wake as it crept closer.

Keegan tensed, his body primed for flight, but he didn't have anywhere to go.

The blackness surrounded them, pressing in on them from all sides.

"Shh," Rune soothed, rubbing his hands comfortingly over Keegan's arms. "It's okay. It won't hurt you."

His mate's calmness soothed him, but he still worried.

"What is it?"

"Rebes is just in a mood. Again." He sighed.

"It'll pass."

"Reeves? Is that a person?"

"Rebes," Rune repeated, enunciating the B.

"As in Erebus."

Oh, okay.

That was fine. Completely normal.

The god of primordial darkness was just in a mood .

Nothing to worry about at all.

“Why is he angry?”

Rune shrugged, his demeanor unbothered.

“He’s a bit of a diva. It doesn’t happen often, but you get used to it.”

Somehow, he doubted that, especially when the darkness finally enveloped the room, plunging them into total blackness and robbing him of his sight.

“It’s okay,” Rune repeated.

“Don’t think about it.”

Kind of hard to do when he felt like he might vibrate out of his skin.

“How?”

“Like this.” Rune’s hands caressed up his arms and over his shoulders to cradle his face, and his warm breath fanned across Keegan’s lips.

“Just focus on me.”

Then their mouths crashed together again, and Rune took advantage of his quiet gasp

to plunge inside.

He tasted and teased, stroking his tongue over Keegan's and retreating, over and over, coaxing him to match the rhythm.

Keegan's pulse pounded in his ears, drowning out everything else.

Unable to see, he couldn't anticipate where his mate would touch him next.

Robbed of sight, sounds muted, he could only feel.

Every soft caress zinged across his skin like an electrical current, and every heavy grope burned like liquid fire.

The short stubble that covered his mate's jaw scratched against his skin as Rune kissed down his neck, eliciting a quiet moan and a deep shiver of desire.

Though he wore loose, comfortable clothing, they felt itchy and restrictive, a barrier between him and his mate he resented.

His cock swelled, throbbing within his soft cotton pants, and even the light pressure of the material was nearly unbearable.

"Rune," he panted, his voice unusually loud in the darkness.

His fingers flexed, digging into the shifter's shoulders in an attempt to anchor himself.

"Fuck, I want you."

His answer came in the form of a deep growl filled with gravel and bass before Rune

claimed his mouth again.

He sucked and nibbled at Keegan's tongue, his bottom lip, drinking him in like the last drop of water in the desert.

Strong, calloused hands slipped into his waistband, sliding over his sensitive skin as they pushed the elastic off his hips.

He groaned when his cock sprang free, his head spinning and his body trembling from the onslaught of sensations.

Every touch overwhelmed.

Every kiss consumed.

It was too much, too intense, pushing him higher and higher until he feared he might not survive the fall.

"You're so hard," Rune growled, fisting his hand around Keegan's length and stroking him from base to crown.

"So hot." He swiped his thumb over the tip, pressing it against the slit.

"Can you feel how much you're leaking for me?"

The dirty words spoken in that deep, commanding voice dragged him beneath a wave of carnal pleasure, and he bucked his hips, fucking into the circle of Rune's hand.

Heart hammering, ears ringing, he gritted his teeth and moaned as his mate stroked him harder, faster, sending him right to the edge.

“Rune. Oh, god. I—I can’t—fuck!”

Rune pushed his other hand between Keegan’s thighs, cradling his aching balls and giving them a gentle squeeze.

“Come for me.”

His body obeyed instantly, igniting like a firework.

Dropping his head back, he moaned loudly, his voice echoing through the library as he painted them both with his release.

Gasping for breath, he collapsed against Rune’s chest, burying his face into the side of the Guardian’s neck as his chest heaved.

Once coherency returned, he slid a hand down his mate’s torso, following the path to the waistband of his leathers.

As he fumbled with the button, however, long fingers closed around his wrist, stopping him.

Keegan frowned and rolled his head to the side, looking up to see his mate’s face, but there was still only darkness.

“Believe me,” Rune said, moving Keegan’s hand up to rest over his racing heart.

“I am more than satisfied.”

“But—”

“Quiet now.” He palmed the back of Keegan’s head and pressed a kiss against his

forehead.

“Just let me hold you.”

Although it felt a little selfish, if that was what his mate wanted, Keegan wanted him to have it.

So, he relaxed against him, smiling when the shifter exhaled in a contented sigh.

Being mated wasn't anything like he'd expected.

Nothing like he'd read about in books.

It was so much better.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:06 am

Chapter six

Rune swiped his finger across the tablet screen, scrolling through the latest list of complaints from village residents and categorizing them by priority.

It was tedious and time-consuming work, but at least it kept him occupied.

In the two weeks since Keegan had blown into his life like a miniature harbinger of chaos—big feelings, big ideas, and big opinions—there had rarely been a moment of peace.

Spontaneous, impulsive, and a little reckless, he never did anything Rune expected.

He never reacted the way most people would.

He didn't follow a pattern or fit into a category.

In fact, the only thing Rune could count on was that he had no idea what the guy would say or do next.

It would likely be entertaining, though.

So much, in fact, that he had started to crave those little nuggets of chaos.

Which made the current lull—their research in the library hitting a dead end—feel even heavier.

Hence his color-coded lists and menial tasks.

But he wasn't the only one in need of a distraction.

Curled up on the other end of the sofa in the sitting room, Keegan stared into the fireplace with a vacant expression.

Wrapped in the blanket Rune had given him on his first day in the castle, knees pulled to his chest, he looked utterly lost.

Lost, but not defeated.

Rune could still see the spark in him, the desire to fight for those he loved.

Unfortunately, they had been playing a losing game, and like the rest of them, Keegan was out of moves.

He understood the frustration, but they weren't helpless, even if the lack of forward momentum made it feel that way.

They had just stalled for the time being.

Turning off the tablet, he tucked it between the cushion and the arm of the couch.

"Let's get out of here."

Keegan turned to him slowly, blinking as if coming out of deep thoughts.

"And go where?"

True, they didn't have many options, and none that appealed after the opulence of the

castle.

Still, he hoped being around other people would help his mate get out of his own head for a while.

“I need to talk to Cian about the supply drop tomorrow.”

Keegan snorted.

“No, you don’t.”

No, he really didn’t, but it sounded like a plausible excuse.

He should have known Keegan would see right through it.

“Fine, but let’s go anyway.”

“Why?”

Always with the damn questions.

“Because you’re moping, and it’s getting on my nerves.”

Keegan’s lips twitched, and the corners of his eyes creased as he struggled to maintain a neutral expression.

It was a valiant effort.

Rune would give him that.

In the end, though, he lost the battle and gave him the smile he’d been hoping for.

“I have to find my shoes.” The words still hung in the air when a pair of black and white sneakers appeared on the floor in front of him.

“Never mind,” he muttered.

“You know, I didn’t die just so I could come here to be bullied by an enchanted castle.”

Rune vaguely remembered what it had been like in those first few years, when the experience had been new and unexpected.

He recalled the way not just the décor had constantly been shifting, but the layout as well.

The library hadn’t even existed for the first decade.

Then, one day, it had simply appeared, nothing more than a little alcove stacked with a dozen or so books.

Over time, it had expanded, the changes subtle, barely noticeable, until it eventually became the expansive space it was now.

In the beginning, the castle had felt like a living being, like another entity that existed within the walls.

Somewhere along the way, though, he had stopped noticing.

He had stopped appreciating the novelty, as well as all the little things that made his life easier.

There had been the barest hint of a flicker when Finn had arrived, a renewal of the

magic and whimsy.

Then Keegan had blown in, igniting that spark into a shower of pyrotechnics and maybe a little mischief.

And for the first time in centuries, the place felt alive again.

“Let’s go,” he repeated.

“Put your shoes on.”

“But I’m comfortable,” Keegan whined, snuggling deeper into his blanket.

The flames that had been crackling merrily in the fireplace instantly extinguished, leaving only smoldering logs.

The cerulean curtains slid together to cover the windows, and the chandelier overhead flickered ominously.

“Okay!” Keegan shouted when the shoes vanished from the floor, only to reappear on the cushion beside him.

“I’m going!”

Rune pretended to rub his jaw while smothering a chuckle.

Watching Keegan argue with a sentient piece of architecture was both the weirdest and funniest thing he’d seen in a long time.

Tossing the blanket off his shoulders, Keegan pulled the sneakers on, then shoved to his feet with more sass than strictly necessary.

Hands on his hips, arms akimbo, he stared around the room, his gaze unfixed, and arched an eyebrow.

“Happy now?”

In response, the coffee table and sofa opposite him disappeared, clearing the path to the doorway.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” he grumbled.

“Let’s get out of here before I set this place on fire.” Dropping his arms, he started marching toward the exit, only to stop short when the coffee table rematerialized right in his path.

“Damn it!” Doubling over, he rubbed his abused shin, his face a mask of irritation.

“It was a joke!”

Rune continued to battle back laughter as he pushed up from his seat.

It wasn’t easy, though, not when the table moved a few scant inches to the side.

Slowly...hesitantly. Then there was Keegan, clearly in over his head but ready to fistfight a fucking coffee table anyway.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it.” Keegan pressed his hand over his heart.

“Please don’t drop anything on me.”

The table vanished, and Rune finally lost the battle, giving into his amusement over the absolute absurdity of the situation.

The castle had survived multiple kitchen fires courtesy of Sindri's cooking, but it threw a tantrum over a single threat from a pint-sized mortal.

"What are you laughing at?" Keegan demanded.

"You." No sense in lying about it when they both knew the answer.

His mate glared, his expression filled with righteous indignation, but he couldn't maintain it for long.

Eventually, his eyes softened, and a smile curved his lips.

"Fair." He glanced around the room warily.

"Let's hurry before I'm ambushed by more furniture."

They managed to exit the room without further incident, but the castle clearly hadn't forgiven him yet.

The landscape paintings that decorated the walls of the corridor had been replaced by portraits of stern-looking gods, their eyes following them as they passed.

Rune recognized a few of the faces, like Hades and Rebes, but he could only guess as to the others.

He thought the one on the end with the curled lip and crazed stare might be Styx, but he couldn't say for sure.

Everything he knew about the goddess had come secondhand from Erus, and the guy absolutely loathed her, so probably not the most accurate source.

Keegan shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans and ducked his head, refusing to look up or acknowledge the paintings.

The tension in his shoulders eased a little when they reached the foyer, but he didn't completely relax until they had exited the castle and cleared the grove of lemon trees.

"So passive-aggressive," he muttered, scuffing his foot over the ground to send sand flying in every direction.

"We're probably going to have bed bugs or something else stupid."

Rune fell into step beside him and quirked an eyebrow.

"What's this 'we' shit? I didn't do anything."

"Yeah, but we share a bed."

Not just a bed.

Since their tryst in the library, Keegan had moved into his room completely, and Rune couldn't have been happier about it.

Still, he couldn't resist teasing.

"Then you can sleep in your own bed tonight."

Keegan jerked his head up, his eyes wide and his mouth slack.

"That's not fair! Shouldn't you, like, I don't know, defend my honor or something?"

"I'm not the one who picked a fight with a pile of magical rocks."

A sly smile curved his lips, and his hazel eyes danced with merriment.

“I’m telling her you said that.”

“Her?”

“Yeah, is that weird? ‘It’ just feels kind of wrong, you know?”

Chuckling, Rune ruffled his hair, then wound an arm around his neck to pull him close.

“Don’t worry, kaelaer. I’ll protect you from the bed bugs.”

Keegan leaned against his side with a quiet laugh of his own.

“My hero.”

They continued along the stone-paved street, following it to the heart of the village where the rickety shops waited.

It was quieter than usual, emptier, and they didn’t pass a single soul on their way to the bakery.

It happened sometimes after one of Rebes’ outbursts.

The darkness unsettled people, and it took a while for the disquiet to ease.

But that had been more than a week ago, and this didn’t feel like the typical quietness after the storm.

Still, he couldn’t do anything about it right then—if there was anything to be done

about it at all—so he filed it away to contemplate later.

The scent of freshly baked bread, buttery crusts, and sweetened apples greeted them when they entered the bakery.

Unlike the diner, the food there had flavor and texture, and it didn't make him want to hurl himself into the river.

Sadly, bread and pie didn't exactly constitute a balanced meal.

Miss Helen greeted them with a warm smile and a firm embrace.

Rune didn't know exactly how long ago she'd died, but she appeared to be middle-aged with kind eyes the color of burnt sienna.

She dressed simply in neutral colors, with a white apron tied around her ample hips, and she always had flecks of flour in her graying hair.

"Let's see you, cherí ," she insisted, capturing Keegan's face between her stocky hands.

"You're looking a little pale, no?" She patted his cheek affectionately, then ushered him toward one of the wobbly tables.

"Sit, sit. I'll bring you some pie."

Keegan's smile stretched the width of his face, and his cheeks tinted an adorable shade of pink.

"Thank you, Miss Helen."

Rune joined him at the table with a snort.

“Hi, Miss Helen. It’s good to see you too.”

She looked up from her place behind the counter, her eyes sharp and narrowed.

“Don’t you sass me, Rune Calix.”

Leaning back in his chair, he held his hands up in supplication.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

She bustled over, carrying a small tin plate with a piece of pie the size of his head.

“I’ve been dead longer than you’ve been alive, yes?” Placing the plate down in front of Keegan, she caressed his hair with a tender smile before pointing a threatening finger at Rune.

“You remember that.”

His heart swelled, and his chest filled with warmth when she winked.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll remember.”

They stayed until Keegan had gotten his fill of both pie and being fussed over.

Then they hugged Miss Helen goodbye and continued down the street to their next stop.

The door to the apothecary creaked when they entered, but the shop itself was clean and tidy, the fragrance of dried herbs and fresh flowers floating on the air.

Tilted shelves leaned against the walls, some so askew it was a wonder they didn't topple over, and each one was lined with small vials and glass bottles.

Paris St. James rounded the desk at the front of the room when they entered, his sea-green eyes brightening with recognition.

Dressed in a pastel pink suit with a matching tie, he presented a stark and startling contrast to Miss Helen.

He was another bright spot in an otherwise bleak world, and Rune always enjoyed his visits to the apothecary.

Today, he had adorned his elongated ears in metallic cuffs and delicate chains that jingled with every step.

Just like their visit to the bakery, Rune was shunted to the side while Paris focused on Keegan.

He turned his head to hide his smile.

Everyone in the village understood the assignment, and he had never been more grateful.

"Oh, honey, your aura is a mess." The pixie fanned his hand over the top of Keegan's head as if trying to swat away the negative energy.

"Don't worry. I've got just the thing." Then he linked his arm through Keegan's and led him toward one of the back shelves.

"Now, are you allergic to anything?"

They left the apothecary twenty minutes later with a packet of powdered reishi to help Keegan relax, a bottle of vitamins, and a small vial of shimmering blue liquid.

Neither of them would tell him the liquid's purpose, but Keegan had hurriedly shoved it into his pocket, a cherry blush staining his face from his cheeks to the tips of his ears.

Next, they stopped by the blacksmith.

Not for Keegan, but so Rune could check in with the grumpy shifter to find out if Jiro had stolen his tools again in an ongoing attempt to renovate his apartment.

Thankfully, there had been no more petty theft, but like the rest of the residents, Geoffrey had taken a liking to Keegan.

Rather than pie or magical remedies, however, he had shown his affection in the form of a serrated dagger with a leather-wrapped hilt.

He had even spent a few minutes giving Keegan a tutorial on how best to use it.

"Give it," Rune demanded when they left, holding his hand out for the blade.

"But it's mine!"

"You don't even know how to use it." And he would likely end up stabbing himself in the leg with it.

"Give it."

Keegan huffed and slapped the handle down against Rune's palm.

“This is theft.”

“Feel free to file a complaint,” he deadpanned, tucking the dagger into a loop on his belt beside his own.

“I just did. That was my complaint.”

“Duly noted.”

They stopped at every business along the main road, and each time, Keegan was given the red-carpet treatment.

He received a misshapen mug at the potter’s shop.

A handkerchief from the seamstress.

A corked bottle of pale ale at the tavern.

And a round, lopsided basket from the weaver to carry everything in.

By the time they reached the diner, he looked lighter than Rune had seen him in days.

Since he didn’t actually have business there, they stayed just long enough to warm themselves by the fire and enjoy a cup of coffee.

Keegan had insisted on using his new mug, which had sparked the first real emotion Rune could recall ever seeing on Cian’s face.

Even if that emotion had been annoyance.

“You said Noah lived here?” Keegan asked as he traced the rim of his cup with his

index finger.

Rune nodded. “Yeah, he had an apartment in the Tower.”

Catching his bottom lip, he bobbed his head slowly, his eyes glazed and unfocused.

“Is there a reason you ask?”

Keegan lifted his head, meeting his gaze with a quiet sigh.

“Can you tell me where it is?”

The day had been going so well, and this wasn’t how he would have chosen to end it.

Rather than progress, this felt like a step backward, but if Keegan needed this, he couldn’t deny him.

“Come on, kaelaer. I’ll take you.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:06 am

Chapter seven

K eegan held his breath as he stepped into Noah's apartment on the seventy-fifth floor of the Tower.

He didn't know why he had come, and part of him already regretted asking Rune to bring him, but he needed to see it.

Despite a lack of lamps or light fixtures, a pale glow illuminated the room, glinting off the white walls and gleaming over the appliances in the kitchen.

A half-empty glass of water still sat on the countertop near the fridge, along with a small saucer dusted in crumbs.

Rune hung back, letting him explore the area at his own pace, but he wore an odd little smile.

Almost like he was...pleased.

"What is it?"

In answer, Rune motioned toward the water glass, then to a black hooded sweatshirt draped over the back of the sofa.

"When a soul crosses the river or gets erased, the units reset themselves."

Noah's apartment looked like he had merely stepped out to run an errand, and the

place was just waiting for him to return.

“So, he’s still alive?” He waved a hand and shook his head.

“You know what I mean.”

“I can’t say for sure, but it’s a good sign.”

Gripping the edge of the counter, Keegan closed his eyes and took several deep breaths.

Noah was still out there, trapped but existing, probably cursing him for getting them into this mess.

It might not seem like much, but it was something, the tiny thread of hope he’d needed to keep going, to keep trying.

Traveling deeper into the apartment, he paused behind the beige sofa, his fingers dancing over the soft cotton of the hoodie.

Not really Noah’s style, and furthermore, it looked too big to fit his brother’s narrow frame.

“Are you sure this is his apartment?” he asked over his shoulder.

Rune nodded confidently.

“Yeah, why?”

Turning, he held the sweater up in front of him by the shoulders to give a visual comparison to his own body.

The fabric absolutely dwarfed him.

“Do you know if he was seeing someone?”

“Uh, no one person in particular,” Rune hedged, suddenly fascinated by a narrow, vertical shelf of cubbies filled with an odd assortment of knickknacks and baubles.

Keegan rolled his eyes and tossed the hoodie back onto the couch.

“If you’re trying to spare my feelings, don’t bother. I am well aware of my brother’s...extracurriculars.” His mate’s continued evasion, however, made him suspicious.

“Wait a minute. Did you...?”

Rune finally turned and met his gaze.

“No.”

“Never?”

“Never,” he answered, a note of finality in his voice.

Keegan believed him, but he couldn’t resist the urge to poke.

“But you thought he was cute.”

“Not my type. Hideous, in fact.”

“You think I’m hideous?” He choked back his laughter as he winged both eyebrows toward his hairline.

“I think you’re beautiful.”

“But not Noah?”

“Hideous,” Rune repeated.

Keegan barked out a laugh.

“Sir, we are literally identical.”

Dropping the facade, Rune chuckled as he placed Keegan’s basket down on the kitchen counter before coming to join him in the living room.

“Not really. It’s subtle, but there are definite differences.”

“Oh?” His mother had always said the same thing.

“Do tell.”

“Your cheeks are softer.” The smile slipped, his expression turning serious as he caressed Keegan’s face with the back of his hand.

“More rounded. Your nose is a little longer.” He drew his fingertip along the bridge.

“And your mouth is fuller,” he concluded, smoothing the pad of his thumb over Keegan’s bottom lip.

Keegan’s breath caught, and tension coiled in his stomach as sparks of electricity ricocheted up and down his spine.

“You smell different too.” Hooking a finger in the collar of his shirt, Rune pulled him

closer, bending to skim his nose up the side of Keegan's throat.

"I love the way you smell." His voice was quiet, husky, with the barest suggestion of a growl.

"Sweet like honeysuckle, but also a little untamed. Like the scent on the air right before a thunderstorm."

Fisting his hands at his side, Keegan closed his eyes, swaying into his mate as his body responded to Rune's nearness.

His heart and mind, however, swirled with conflicting thoughts and emotions, triggered by that one little word.

Love.

He understood familial love, platonic love, but he had never experienced the state of being in love.

Oh, he'd read about it.

He'd heard other people describe it.

Media made it sound like a fairy tale.

Friends talked about it with giddiness, as if it didn't come with a whole host of side effects, like insecurity, uncertainty, and nearly paralyzing fear.

While he agreed the descent had been effortless, the act itself was fucking terrifying.

Was he enough? Too much?

Did Rune feel the same way?

Even though he resided in the Underworld, Rune was still alive, meaning he had options Keegan didn't.

What happened if he grew tired of the gloom and decided to return to his life topside?

He had said Keegan belonged to him.

Not temporarily, not just until they rescued Noah, but indelibly.

Yet, he hadn't claimed him.

In fact, they hadn't even discussed that being a possibility.

Keegan sensed more than saw the shift in his mate, the tension that bled through his muscles as he straightened.

He couldn't say the response was entirely unexpected either.

Rune might not be able to read his mind, but he didn't need to, not when he could hear the frantic beat of Keegan's heart and smell the anxiety pouring off him.

"What's wrong, kaelaer?"

He could give him the pretty version.

The grown-up response filled with shiny words and emotional maturity.

It wouldn't be authentic, though, and they'd both know it.

So, he took a deep breath and blurted out the crux of the problem, the true core from which everything else stemmed.

“I love you, and I’m scared you don’t love me back.”

Rune growled, the sound resonating throughout the room, and the muscles in his jaw and neck swelled with tension.

His nostrils flared, his lips pressed together, and his irises glowed with the same golden light that manifested when he had strong feelings about something.

“Before I answer,” he said, his voice too calm, too steady, “I want to know why you feel that way.”

Nothing about their relationship had taught him to expect instant reassurance or validation, so he didn’t know why he had assumed this time would be different.

On the other hand, he had also learned there was always a lesson to be gleaned, even if he didn’t understand it right away.

Still, feeling something and explaining why he felt it were two entirely separate beasts.

Emotions tended to be messy, illogical, and not always based in facts.

Which, he realized, was probably the point Rune wanted to make.

When he examined it objectively, he couldn’t point to anything that Rune had done to make him feel uncertain.

From the moment they’d met, the Guardian had been attentive, affectionate, and

committed.

Sure, Rune challenged him, but in ways that made him better, stronger.

He showed up consistently, and he always made Keegan feel special, even in the little things, like giving him first dibs on the shower.

Rune called him kaelaer .

Not something generic, like sweetheart, baby, or darling.

Not something sentimental, like treasure or star.

Whether consciously or subconsciously, he had chosen an endearment both meaningful and lovingly irreverent.

Little chaos.

As a man who valued order, being paired with a mate who broke out in hives at the very mention of a schedule couldn't be easy.

But Rune hadn't tried to change him.

He'd embraced it and found a way to make their differences work for them, not against them.

Which, once again, brought him full circle to the heart of his insecurities.

“Why haven't you claimed me?”

This time, the answer came immediately, but it wasn't what he had expected.

“Because that’s not my choice to make.”

“I...but...” His brain malfunctioned, short-circuiting as it tried to rewrite its own narrative.

While he had never rejected the idea of bonding with Rune, he’d also never given any indication that it was something he wanted.

In reality, he had simply been too scared to ask for it, too afraid of rejection, but he couldn’t blame his mate for that.

It also answered another question he’d been struggling with, even if he hadn’t been able to put it into words.

He did have a choice.

He had agency. Fate had brought them together, but they weren’t beholden to it.

“It’s my choice,” he murmured.

“That’s right, kaelaer .” Rune’s shoulders visibly relaxed, and a smile curved his lips.

“It always has been.”

Stepping forward, closing the distance between them, Keegan took his mate’s hands and shook his head.

“Not just mine. It’s our choice.”

“And I will always choose you.”

The dam broke open, flooding him with emotions and causing his voice to tremble under the weight of them.

“And I choose us. Not for right now.” He glanced up at his mate and smirked.

“Not for a little while. But forever.”

“You are mine, Keegan Marsh.” A noise somewhere between a growl and a purr rolled in his chest as he palmed the back of Keegan’s neck and pulled him closer.

“Don’t ever doubt that.”

How could he when Rune proved it every day in all the ways that mattered?

“Then show me.”

“Gods, I love you.”

The words burst from his lips, quiet and shaky, restraint alone no longer enough to hold them back.

Then he slanted their mouths together, dragging Keegan into a hard kiss filled with equal parts desire and desperation.

Capturing Keegan’s face in his big hands, Rune delved between his lips to taste and tease.

Their tongues slid together, gliding and tangling, dancing to an intimate rhythm as his mate traced the recesses of his mouth in minute detail.

Rune leaned into him, forcing him back a step, then another, guiding him across the

room.

A soft breath puffed from Keegan's lips when he connected with the wall, his shoulders pressed into the hard surface, anchored there by the shifter's muscular frame.

A knee slipped between his parted thighs, holding him in place and leaving Rune's hands free to map and explore.

Piece by piece, his mate took him apart as he groped and caressed, eliciting needy moans and deep shudders.

Keegan dropped his head back against the wall when Rune released his mouth to kiss down his neck, leaving a trail of fire and need in his wake.

His heart slammed against his ribs, almost painful in its intensity, and his muscles quivered, taut with expectancy.

Interspersed with ragged moans, his breaths came in shallow gasps, every inhalation searing his lungs.

Rune undressed him slowly, methodically, peeling away the layers that separated them, both literally and metaphorically, leaving Keegan bared and shaking.

Then he divested his own clothing in the same controlled, precise movements, making sure Keegan's gaze remained fixated on him as he revealed hard muscles wrapped in velvet skin.

Long and thick, his cock jutted proudly from a nest of dark curls, the length pulsating with his heartbeat and the crown glistening wetly in the light.

Muscles flexed and rippled, every hard bulge accentuated by shadowed valleys when he moved.

Gathering Keegan's wrists in one hand, he stretched his arms over his head and pinned them to the wall.

A strangled groan burst from Keegan's mouth when he was blanketed in a wall of heat, the sound muffled when Rune attacked his mouth in another darkly possessive kiss.

His mate consumed him, overwhelmed him, leaving him completely undone.

Every touch was purposeful.

Every glide of his tongue designed to ignite.

Every scrape of teeth demanding a response.

Rune didn't move away, but Keegan felt him shift to the side, his arm stretched and his hand reaching, fumbling for the narrow shelf of cubbies beside them.

Objects toppled over and tumbled to the floor, the sound muted and distant to Keegan's scrambled brain.

Only the snick of a bottle cap cut through the lusty haze, making his cock throb and his muscles clench in eager anticipation.

A corded arm wrapped around his waist, lifting him from the floor and sliding him up the wall.

With his arms still stretched over his head, he locked his legs around Rune's waist for

balance, his eyes rolling back in his head when his mate's slick erection slid against his own.

Then Rune's mouth was on him again, licking and nibbling along the column of his throat as he repositioned them, the thick head of his cock pressing at Keegan's entrance.

His hips flexed, applying gentle pressure, and Keegan groaned when the tight muscles parted to accept the invasion.

He squeezed his eyes closed, quaking as Rune pushed inside him, feeding the swollen length to his clenching channel.

Pressure built in his balls, and the bite of pain, as his muscles stretched to accommodate the thick shaft, sent a wave of heat washing over him.

"Relax," Rune murmured against the side of his neck, stilling to give him a moment to adjust. "Let me in, kaelaer."

Keegan took a couple of shaky breaths and nodded his readiness.

Rune started slow, setting a temperate pace meant to coax rather to incite, every measured glide training Keegan's body, teaching it what to expect.

As his muscles responded, opening, surrendering, his mate changed the rhythm, increasing both the tempo and the intensity.

Releasing his wrists, Rune wrapped both hands around Keegan's thighs, gripping them firmly as he pulled him onto his cock with every hard thrust. Keegan dropped his own hands to the male's shoulders, his fingers grasping and clawing at the sweat-slicked skin.

“Harder.” He reached between them and fisted his cock, jerking himself in tandem with Rune’s forceful thrusts.

“Give me more.”

A deep, sexy growl rolled through the room as his mate hammered into him.

Stripped bare of his restraint, Rune pistoned his hips, pumping harder and faster, pushing Keegan up the wall with every demanding plunge.

Rune’s eyes glowed, the ring of golden light swelling and pulsing, and his canines elongated, the tips visible beneath his upper lip.

Reacting on instinct, responding with total submission, Keegan turned his head and bared his throat in offering.

The Guardian didn’t hesitate.

Closing his mouth around the pulsing vein, he sank his sharp fangs into the delicate flesh with a growl that reverberated through Keegan’s entire body.

There was no real pain, just a pinch, a sting that only increased his pleasure and drove him closer to the precipice.

They continued to rock together when Rune lifted his head, pushing and pulling, each of them chasing something that waited just beyond reach.

Keegan stroked his cock faster, his grip tight and desperate, the pressure building once more as the tension stretched to its limits.

Rune claimed his mouth again, forcing his tongue between Keegan’s parted lips.

It was clumsy and uncoordinated as he continued to drive into him, but every swipe of his tongue carried the distinct taste of copper, of Rune's very essence.

A scream ripped from Keegan's throat as a surge of heat and light exploded in his chest. Strong and unbreakable, the threads of fate solidified, binding him and Rune together, their souls merging, joining.

"Mine," Rune rasped, twisting his hips and slamming into him.

Clinging to his mate, Keegan cried out his name, bucking and writhing as his orgasm tore through him, rolling him beneath a wave of indescribable pleasure.

Translucent ropes of hot seed burst from the end of his cock, spilling over his hand and splashing against Rune's rippling abs.

Rune cursed and dropped his head to the wall beside Keegan, a near-constant growl vibrating in his chest as he thrust through his own climax, filling Keegan's depths with his release.

"I think I died," Keegan muttered a moment later as they held to each other in the afterglow.

"I hate to break it to you, but you're already dead."

"Then I think I was just resurrected."

Rune's chuckle ended with a groan when his softening cock slipped from Keegan's body.

"You are ridiculous, and I absolutely adore you."

He gasped, his head snapping up when Rune's voice floated into his mind, the tone filled with love and a hint of smugness.

"I heard you in my head."

His mate smiled.

"I can hear you too."

"This is weird, but also kind of awesome."

"Don't worry, you'll get used to it."

Keegan giggled, giddy with the shininess of new love.

"Are we going to unlock any other superpowers?"

"I highly doubt it."

He leaned back against the wall and stared into his mate's eyes, speaking his next words out loud.

"But you don't know. We should try again." His cock twitched, swelling with renewed interest. "Right now."

Growling, Rune leaned into him, covering him as he brought their mouths together.

"Whatever you want, kaelaer."

Keegan grinned and spread his legs wider, welcoming the shifter into the cradle of his hips.

Oh, he definitely liked the sound of that.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:06 am

Chapter eight

Something was wrong.

Rune didn't have evidence, nothing he could point to as the cause, but he felt it.

He sensed it in the emptiness of the village streets.

In the hush that filled the shops.

He saw it on the faces of the residents.

Heard it in their concerned whispers.

He even detected it in seemingly innocuous things, like the lack of grievances filed from the eighth-floor tenants at the high-rise.

For centuries, not a week had gone by without him receiving at least one complaint from the group, yet the past couple of weeks had been crickets.

It wasn't just them either.

The whole of the Tower had been uncharacteristically quiet.

Sure, maybe everyone had collectively decided to take a break from their petty quarrels, but he doubted it.

He knew the patterns, the statistics, and the trends.

And those kinds of numbers didn't just dramatically fall off without a reason.

“And we're here because there's not a problem?”

Rune glanced over at his mate as they entered the Tower lobby.

“Yes.”

“Cool. Just checking.”

There had been a marked difference in Keegan's mood and demeanor in the last several days.

While Rune didn't want to take too much credit, he did hope he might have at least a small part to play in that change.

Since they had cemented their mating bond, the guy had been calmer, less stressed.

The connection also seemed to have settled something inside him, grounding him in ways that Rune didn't fully grasp yet.

Waiting to claim Keegan, to intrinsically link their hearts, minds, and souls, had never been about uncertainty.

He had always known where they were headed, but Keegan had needed time.

Not just to mourn, but to grow, to accept, and to understand he had a hell of a lot more power in their relationship than he realized.

At the same time, Rune admitted he may have miscalculated.

In his mind, he'd been giving his mate a choice, but in reality, he had been allowing him to spiral.

He had never been the type to wear his heart on his sleeve or talk openly about his feelings, choosing instead to show his love through actions.

But if Keegan needed the words to feel secure and happy, he'd try.

Then there were the little things.

Things he considered unimportant, but that meant the world to his mate.

Things like wearing his clothes.

Rune legitimately couldn't remember a time in his life when he had owned a hoodie, let alone worn one.

Then, one day, he had awoken to a closet full of them.

At first, he had figured he'd done something to offend their finicky home, and that was the castle's payback.

He had been confused and a little annoyed when Keegan had insisted he wear one, but after a lot of prodding, he had finally given in.

It had been soft and warm, and it had fit him fine, but he hadn't loved it.

He also hadn't understood what the big deal was.

Until he'd seen Keegan wearing it the next morning.

Of course, it had been far too big on him, but he'd looked adorable in it.

And there had been something about seeing Keegan in his clothes, something primal, visceral, that had completely undone him.

Moreover, every time he saw Keegan turn his head and sniff at the collar, it would crack his chest wide open.

Now, he wore one of the sweatshirts around the castle for a couple of hours every night.

Not because he enjoyed it, but because he loved what it led to.

Glancing at him as they waited for the elevator, a quiet, possessive growl vibrated in his throat.

The black hoodie swallowed his mate, the hem brushing the tops of his thighs, but he looked so fucking cute in it.

Damn near edible.

"You're looking at me weird."

"How am I looking at you, kaelaer?"

"Like you want to eat me." Fisting his hands in the sleeve cuffs, he rocked up on his toes and wiggled his eyebrows.

"Which I'm totally down with, in case you were wondering."

Rune chuckled and pulled him close by the drawstrings to kiss the top of his head.

“Behave.”

“Boo.” Keegan let out a long, dramatic sigh, even as he leaned into Rune’s side.

“Sounds boring, but fine.”

“Tell me something,” he said, ushering his mate into the elevator when the doors parted with a quiet ding.

“Why do you like black and white?”

He could now say with confidence that the initial color scheme hadn’t been a fluke or a learning curve.

These were indeed the guy’s favorite colors.

He just didn’t understand why when it matched nothing about his colorful personality.

Keegan shrugged. “Because they’re simple.”

“Explain.”

“Well, they go with everything. And if I said my favorite color was blue, what does that even mean?” He held his hand up and began ticking the choices off on his fingers as he named them.

“Like royal blue? Navy? Periwinkle?”

“Isn’t that purple?”

“See! That’s what I mean!”

Rune laughed again, completely gone for this little chaos monster who craved simplicity while simultaneously being the walking embodiment of contradiction.

The lift slowed to a stop, opening onto the eighth-floor corridor.

“Got it. No blue. No purple. Just—Keegan?” He paused outside of the cab and glanced over his shoulder when he realized his mate hadn’t followed.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” he answered, his tone uncertain as he dragged his gaze away from the wall of glass.

“I thought I saw…” Trailing off, he shook his head and pasted on a bright smile.

“Never mind.”

Rune took his hand when Keegan reached for him, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the inside of the elevator.

Nothing appeared suspicious or out of place, though.

With no threat to fight, he shrugged it off and continued down the hallway.

“Really,” Keegan said, his voice slipping into Rune’s mind.

“Why are we here? Is this like an afterlife wellness check?”

A fairly apt description actually.

“Yeah, I guess you could say that. Everything has been a little too quiet lately.”

“And you’re worried.”

“I’m...interested.”

“Because you’re worried.” Keegan squeezed his hand as he looked up at him with an angelic smile.

“That’s really sweet.”

He didn’t consider the residents of floor eight friends, but he had grown fond of the group over the years.

“It’s my job.”

“ Whatever you need to tell yourself.”

“You’re kind of a pain in my ass,” he countered, speaking the words out loud.

He chuckled, secretly loving that Keegan always called him on his bullshit, even when he didn’t want to be seen.

“You know that, right?”

Keegan shrugged, completely unbothered.

“Obviously, but I figure turnabout is fair play.” He rubbed a hand over his backside and sighed.

“I’m still walking funny.”

Gods, he was an absolute menace, and Rune couldn’t have loved him more.

“And whose fault is that?”

“Look, I didn’t know that stuff Paris gave me would work that well.”

As Rune had suspected, the glass vial had contained a libido enhancer that Keegan certainly didn’t need.

Still, he’d wanted to try it, and the results had been nothing short of explosive.

Hell, even Rune had been sweat-soaked and exhausted by the time they had collapsed onto the bed.

“I didn’t hear you complaining last night. Unless ‘oh, god, please,’ was a cry for divine intervention.”

Keegan choked and started coughing as a vibrant blush crept up his neck and into his cheeks.

“Okay,” he wheezed. “You win that one.”

Feeling pretty fucking smug about it too, Rune grinned as they approached the door of the first unit.

He lifted his hand and rapped his knuckles against the wood, calling Sergei’s name as he did so in case the asshole got the idea to ignore the summons.

He received no response, so he tried again.

Still nothing.

“Maybe he’s in the village,” Keegan suggested, the teasing gone from his voice now.

“He never leaves.”

“Well, maybe he did.” Keegan pulled on his hand.

“Let’s try another one.”

Rune strode to the next door and knocked loudly.

“Esther! It’s Rune. Open the door.”

Nothing, not even the smell of microwaved tuna, emanated from the apartment.

“I’ll try the next one.” Keegan frowned, his brow etched with concern.

“Who lives there?”

“Dolma.” He stared down the hallway toward the last door at the end.

“I’ll try Jiro.”

Jogging past his mate, he had just reached the unit when a thunderous bang echoed through the space and shook the walls.

He jerked around, shaking his head as he watched Keegan pound on the door with the side of his fist.

“Police! Open up!” Keegan yelled.

“Fire! Flood! Existential crisis!”

“What are you doing?”

Keegan looked at him and shrugged.

“Your way wasn’t working.”

Well, he wasn’t wrong.

Which was why Rune did something he never would have considered in the past. He removed the slim, brass skeleton key from his pocket and unlocked the door of Jiro’s apartment.

He considered it a gross invasion of privacy, an overstep of his authority, but he had officially moved past interested.

“Stay here,” he ordered when Keegan joined him outside the unit.

He wrung his hands together and nodded as he took a step back from the doorway.

No sass. No arguments.

Entering the apartment, he moved slowly, every step careful and measured, as he listened for even the smallest noise.

But it was quiet. Eerily so.

Instead of sofas and chairs, the room consisted of floor pillows placed around a small squat table in the main area, while a shoji screen separated the space from the bedroom.

The futon had been rolled out for the night, the quilt pulled back in preparation, but it didn't look as if it had been slept in.

“Keegan,” he called through their bond.

“You can come in.”

“Oh.” Hurrying into the room, Keegan turned his head this way and that, trying to take in everything at once.

“This is...not what I expected.”

The tiny kitchen had been tucked into the corner, a hot plate and a refrigerator the only modern appliances in view.

On the narrow countertop, a sipper cup perched on a dented saucer next to a painted teapot, along with what looked like the remnants of a sweet bun.

Following his gaze, Keegan stepped up to the counter and dipped his finger into the teacup.

“It's cold.”

Rune frowned.

The place was giving off the same unsettling vibes he'd felt in Noah's apartment.

Lifeless, yet suspended in time, as if the occupant had vanished in the middle of their nightly routine.

“Should we check the others?” Keegan asked, a slight tremor to his voice now.

“No.” He already knew what they would find.

“I want to see the other floors.” While he would have preferred to do it alone, he didn’t have time to escort his mate back to the castle, and he sure as fuck wasn’t sending him off on his own.

“Stay close.”

Rune didn’t have a specific destination in mind when he stepped into the elevator again.

With no buttons inside the cab, he could only trust that the Tower would take him where he needed to go.

The door closed, then opened again almost immediately, dumping them out onto the thirty-second level of the high-rise.

“Why...oh, god.” Keegan pressed a hand to his mouth.

“Does that mean...?”

Rune didn’t know yet, and he didn’t want to speculate, but he had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach that this was where the investigative thread ended.

At least for now. Whatever sickness had infected the building, it had already spread this far.

“Come on.” If the Tower had brought him here, there must be something, some clue left behind.

“Let’s check the apartments.”

Though he knew what to expect, that still didn't prepare him for what he found.

Empty beds. Half-eaten meals.

A broken glass on the kitchen floor.

Dishwater in the sink.

An open book on the sofa.

Each space quiet, still, and haunted by absence.

After searching half a dozen units, Rune had seen enough.

"We need to talk to Orrin."

"Wait." Standing in the middle of a bathroom decorated in shades of cream and rose, Keegan lifted his hand and motioned for Rune to join him.

"Come here." At the same time, he pointed to the large mirror hung on the wall above the vanity, frameless and backlit by muted amber light.

"Look at this."

Joining him in the cramped space, Rune pressed against his back as he studied the mirror.

If not for the distortion of his reflection, he might have missed it.

Subtle, almost imperceptible, the glass contorted in a tight circle, rippling outward like a drop of water over the surface of a still pond.

“Is that normal?”

Rune rested a comforting hand on his mate’s shoulder.

For his sake or Keegan’s, he didn’t know.

Maybe both.

“No, kaelaer , that’s not normal.”

“Then why are you smiling?” Keegan asked, meeting his gaze in the mirror.

He wasn’t.

But his reflection was.

Not just any smile either.

Cold, heartless, calculating—it was the kind of expression that promised suffering.

“Keegan, step away.”

But he had spoken too late.

With a violent crack, the mirror splintered, and ropes of liquid mercury sprang from the shards, writhing and reaching.

They wrapped themselves around Keegan’s arms and neck, squeezing as they retreated, dragging him toward whatever hell waited beyond.

Unsheathing the dagger from his belt, he cut at the vines, but he might as well have

been trying to slice water for all the good it did.

He abandoned the blade and grabbed his mate instead, holding him around the waist as he tried in vain to keep him there.

The harder he struggled, though, the more Keegan coughed and sputtered, the whip around his neck tightening, biting into his skin.

Although his mate was already dead, and therefore shouldn't be able to die again , Rune had never seen magic like this.

He didn't understand it, didn't trust it, and he sure as hell wasn't about to risk his mate on a theory.

For the first time in more than a millennium, he faced a fight he couldn't win.

And the only way out... was through.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:06 am

Chapter nine

Keegan fell to his knees, clutching his throat as he gasped for air.

Though his skin burned where the mirror ropes had touched him, ice pumped through his veins, contorting his body in deep, racking shudders.

His head spun, his eyes watered, and his heartbeat pounded in his ears like a war drum.

Then, before he could even catch his breath or process what had just happened, he was pulled upright and lifted from the ground.

Panic clawed at him, eating away any semblance of civility, and he reacted on pure instinct, kicking and flailing as he fought against his unknown attacker.

“Keegan! Keegan, it’s me.” Strong, protective arms surrounded him, crushing him against a wall of solid muscle.

“It’s me, Kaelaer,” Rune shouted into his mind.

“You’re okay.”

He felt pretty fucking far from okay, but he clutched at Rune, breathing in his scent and soaking in his steadying presence.

“What the hell was that?” he asked, his voice hoarse and shaky.

“I think a better question is, where the hell are we?”

Taking a deep breath, preparing himself for some sinister hellscape, Keegan lifted his head and forced his eyes open.

Instead of lightning-streaked skies and rivers of lava, however, he found himself standing on the outskirts of a familiar setting.

The Village of Lost Souls.

Only...not.

For starters, everything had been reversed.

The shops sat where the Tower had been, the high-rise and castle completely absent, leaving large gaps in the terrain.

At the bottom of the hill, a crumbling pier led into a dry riverbed, and rather than perpetual twilight, an orange hue blanketed the village, the light hazy like a noxious cloud.

“What is this place?”

More importantly, how did they get back to where they belonged?

“I don’t know,” Rune answered, and he sounded none too happy about it.

“I guess we better check it out, though. If the same thing happened to the other souls, maybe they ended up here as well.”

The last thing he wanted to do was go traipsing through some deranged mirror world,

but they couldn't just stand there and do nothing.

Even if someone had noticed their absence, they would have no way of reaching them without ending up trapped themselves.

Which meant no one was coming to save them.

"Yeah, okay," he agreed, albeit reluctantly.

"Maybe someone can tell us what's going on."

Hand in hand, they followed a narrow road made of inky black stones, the surface glossy and reflective like polished onyx.

A frigid wind whipped through the town, ruffling Keegan's hair and pelting his face with grains of glittery white sand.

Without a word, Rune reached over and flipped Keegan's hood up, pulling it tight around his head.

While he hadn't thought it possible, Keegan smiled.

"Thanks."

Rune responded with a muffled grunt.

"Let's start at the diner." He pointed toward the building closest to them.

"If the souls ended up here, they would head somewhere familiar."

Yeah, that made sense.

If he had come through the mirror alone, that likely would have been the first place he went as well.

At the same time, he sent up a silent prayer of gratitude to whatever deity was listening that he didn't have to navigate this nightmare on his own.

"How are you so calm about this?" Granted, one of them needed to keep a level head, but he just couldn't comprehend it.

"I'm not calm, but panic is a luxury I don't have right now."

With that one statement, Keegan finally understood.

This was no longer Rune, the slightly disgruntled supervisor who managed resident complaints and oversaw supply drops once a week.

This was Rune, the Guardian, the protector.

Stoic, single-minded, and determined, he had flipped the switch to warrior mode.

It was intense, a little terrifying, but also...

kind of hot?

The hinges didn't screech when Rune pushed open the door of the diner.

No fire waited for them in the stone hearth.

No smiling Cian standing behind the counter with a cup of hot coffee.

In fact, there was nothing there at all beyond empty tables and a thick layer of dust.

They checked the bakery next, then the apothecary, moving down the row of dilapidated buildings with crooked doors.

Each time, they were met with silence, finding only emptiness where there should have been life.

“I don’t understand.” Hundreds of souls must have been sucked into this place.

“Where is everyone?”

Outside of the blacksmith, Rune stared up and down the paved street, scanning their surroundings as he turned in a slow circle.

Once he had completed his assessment, he nodded and took Keegan’s hand.

“There’s nothing else here, meaning there’s only one place left to go.”

Then he started walking, pulling Keegan with him as he marched down the hill toward the river.

Well, where the River Acheron should have been.

There were no dark waters filled with glowing souls here.

No ferry to aid them to the other side.

Just a seemingly endless stretch of white sand dotted with black trees, their branches spindly, twisted, and barren.

When they reached the bank, Rune scrambled down the steep drop-off with ease, then turned to offer his hand, helping Keegan navigate the crumbling earth.

Once he reached the bottom, they looked at each other, their eyes saying things they didn't have the heart to speak, and nodded.

Still, Keegan saw no signs of life—or afterlife for that matter.

As they walked in silence, he scanned the ground for footprints, but if anyone had passed through there, the wind had since eroded the evidence.

The air grew heavier as they ventured farther into the desolation, the oppressive silence pressing in on them from all sides.

Every crackle of shifting sand beneath their feet echoed unnaturally, carried away by the cold wind.

As they passed one of the trees, Keegan paused, his gaze drawn to the way the light refracted off the surface.

The black bark gleamed slickly, bubbling like oil on water as it swelled and contracted in an unsettling mimicry of a pulse.

Turning away, he shook his head, choking back his fear as he hurried to catch up to his mate.

Just beyond the halfway point, the atmosphere shifted again, the orange haze fading to a muted silvery-blue glow that did nothing to ease his anxiety.

Shadows flickered and faded where none should have been, their blurred outlines somehow sharper against the stark backdrop.

“Rune?”

“I see them.” He squeezed Keegan’s hand, urging him to hurry his steps.

“Just keep walking.”

His heart beat faster, knocking against his ribcage, and the hair on his nape stood on end.

He ducked his head, his back bowing with the weight of stares from eyes he couldn’t see.

Whether the shadows or something darker, they were being watched, tracked.

The wind settled to a gentle breeze as the shoreline came into view, but even that didn’t bring relief.

Without the constant roar in his ears, he heard it now.

The scratching. The chittering.

Soft at first, muffled, but growing louder.

The shadows encroached, growing bolder with every step they took.

They danced at the edges of his periphery, slinking closer, their voices resonating like the clack of a typewriter.

Then, without warning, one darted in front of them, scuttling across the ground like a giant spider, its clicking interspersed with high-pitched hisses.

Something brushed against the back of his legs, pulling a yelp from him, and he spun around, searching for the offender.

What he saw made his stomach drop and his heart seize.

The shadows rolled toward them like dense, black fog, crawling and tumbling over one another as they reached out with long, crooked limbs.

“Run!” Rune shouted, grabbing him by the back of his sweater and spinning him around.

“Go!”

Heart pounding, muscles taught, Keegan pumped his arms as he sprinted across the sand.

His breath came in ragged pants, searing his lungs and burning his throat, as he pushed himself harder, faster, his eyes trained on the shoreline ahead of him.

He didn’t slow, didn’t dare look behind him, but he could sense the shadows closing in, could practically feel their icy breath on the back of his neck.

“Go,” Rune repeated when they finally reached the other side of the river.

“Climb.”

Grabbing hold of an exposed root, Keegan used it to pull himself up the hill, his feet scrambling for purchase as the packed earth cracked beneath him.

Slipping and sliding, he finally managed to heave himself over the edge of the embankment, rolling onto a patch of thick, wet grass.

He bound to his feet, prepared to keep running, but stumbled to a stop when he realized Rune hadn’t ascended the drop-off with him.

Turning, searching, his heart clenched when he spotted his mate still in the riverbed, his back stiff as he marched toward the oncoming horde.

“Rune!”

“Run, Keegan. Don’t look back. Just keep running.”

Striding through the sand, his form began to shift, the air around him thickening, shimmering.

His shoulders widened and his back arched, bending him forward in a hunched, unnatural posture.

The fabric of his shirt shredded, falling away in tattered strips, as dense, midnight-black fur erupted across his body.

His legs contorted, lengthening into powerful limbs tipped with claws like polished obsidian.

Keegan couldn’t look away, mesmerized by the terrifying transformation.

His mate’s face elongated into a broad snout, his fangs gleaming like ivory daggers as he released a guttural roar that shook the ground and reverberated through the trees.

By the time the shift was complete, he towered above the riverbed, a colossal black bear with eyes that burned like hellfire.

Lowering his head, he roared again, a sound of defiance and primal challenge.

Keegan stood paralyzed, his sneakers rooted to the ground with indecision.

Rune had told him to run.

He'd told him not to look back, but he couldn't do it.

He couldn't leave him.

His stomach twisted with dread as his mate charged into the blackness, his massive paws throwing up sand behind him and leaving indentions in the earth.

The shadow monsters swarmed, undeterred by his gnashing teeth and swiping claws.

They crawled over his back, his head, blanketing him in an impenetrable cloud of darkness.

“Rune!” A hollow ache formed in the pit of his stomach, and his legs trembled, threatening to give way.

“Rune!”

“Keegan, get out of here!”

But he didn't run.

Afraid for his mate, frustrated with his own uselessness, he paced the riverbank, desperately racking his brain for some way to help.

He didn't have fangs or claws, no manmade weapon that could cut through shadows.

In fact, he knew of only one way to dispel the darkness.

The thought had barely finished forming when a circle of orange light emerged from

the trees behind them, as if the forest itself had heard his pleas and responded with favor.

Instead of divine or cosmic intervention, however, salvation came in the form of a face that looked identical to his own.

“It’s about time,” his brother panted as he came to a stop in front of him.

“Noah? Oh, my god, Noah!”

“When this is over, I’m going to punch you right in the mouth. Consider yourself warned.” He shoved one of the flaming torches he carried into Keegan’s hand.

“Take this and follow me.”

Keegan barely had time to register the weight of the wood in his grip before Noah darted ahead, the flames creating a ring of glowing protection around him.

Keegan ran after him, holding his own torch overhead as he slid down the embankment and hurried into the fray.

The monsters recoiled at their approach, writhing and hissing as they peeled away from Rune’s body.

For the first time since the fight began, Keegan caught a glimpse of his mate.

His fur was matted and streaked in crimson, with patches missing in some places, but he was still moving, still fighting.

“Rune.” He rushed forward to stand in front of the beast, stroking the fur on his chest as he trembled with relief.

“Are you okay? Where are you hurt?”

He had a long gash along his snout, and his upper lip had been split, revealing the massive canine beneath, but otherwise, he appeared unharmed.

Hell, he wasn't even breathing heavily.

“I'll heal.” His eyes tracked Keegan's twin, watching as he paced around them, waving his torch like a talisman.

“I told you to run.”

The gods save him from stubborn fools.

“Yeah, and where would you be if I had?”

Rune dropped his massive head, nuzzling against the side of Keegan's face.

“You never listen.” His tone was soft, though, gentle, filled with indulgence and affection.

“We need to go.” Taking a step back, he lowered himself to the ground, but instead of shifting again, he chuffed.

“Get your brother and climb up.”

Keegan frowned.

“You're hurt.”

“I'm already healing. Hurry up before they come back.”

Seeing no other alternative, he called for Noah to join them, then boosted him onto his mate's back.

Passing his torch to his brother, he crawled up after him, helped along by a paw the size of a freaking hubcap.

“Hold tight,” Rune warned as he pushed to his feet and started toward the riverbank.

“And whatever you do, don't let those torches go out.”

Chapter ten

They made their way through the forest of sparsely packed trees in a halo of firelight, passing sentinels along the path, all with their own torches to keep the darkness at bay.

Some souls Rune recognized, some he didn't, but he offered a nod of respect and gratitude to each of them.

"We take turns watching for new souls," Noah explained when Keegan asked about the watchmen.

"There's more than just shadows out there, and it's too dangerous in the riverbed, but we help as much as we can."

That one sentence told Rune everything he needed to know.

More souls arrived often enough that a patrol had been formed.

The mirror world was hostile with threats he hadn't even seen yet.

Most importantly, it told him that those who had found themselves trapped there hadn't given up.

They were fighting back in the only ways they could.

"What were those things?" Keegan asked, his voice quiet and wispy.

“Soul eaters. They devour the dead. Good thing Rune here isn’t like us, or we’d be making this trip back alone.”

A hand patted Rune’s shoulder, the sensation barely detectable through his dense fur.

“Rune?”

Gods, he hated the fear in his mate’s voice.

“Just breathe. I’m still here . ”

They continued mostly in silence after that, Noah occasionally calling out directions, leading him across a starlit valley to another replica of the Village of Lost Souls.

Still sad. Still crumbling.

But this one alive with movement and conversation.

There was no soft glimmer of twilight, no cloud of hazy orange light.

Instead, the place glowed, illuminated from every angle in shades of yellow and amber.

Torches lined the dirt paths that wound through the settlement, and lanterns hung over every shop entrance.

Windows flared to life with the flicker of flames, and in the center of everything, a massive bonfire burned inside a circular pit carved into the ground.

The doors of the businesses stood open, souls coming and going as they went about their tasks.

Some tended the fire, some replaced torches, and others simply gathered in the safety of the light.

Rune growled his approval.

This wasn't the encampment of scared, broken souls he had expected to find.

These were fighters, survivors, and they had chosen this place to make their stand in a world that didn't play by the rules.

"Oh, my god," Keegan breathed.

"How...how long have you been here?"

An apt question because while Keegan had only been in the Underworld for a few weeks, this level of cooperation hadn't happened overnight.

"I don't know," Noah responded.

"A while. The village was already here and operational when I arrived, though. Then more souls started spilling in, and we adapted."

"We?"

Noah snorted, the sound filled with disgust and derisiveness.

"Brie's other victims."

"Other victims?" Keegan parroted again, clearly struggling to make sense of the incomprehensible.

“It’ll be easier if I just show you.”

No one appeared startled or concerned about having a huge bear with glowing eyes in their midst. They stepped aside to allow him to pass, and a few sent curious glances in his direction, but otherwise, no one really reacted to his presence.

Beside the bonfire, Rune lowered himself to the ground with a quiet grunt.

His wounds had already stitched themselves together, but the ache from the battle still lingered.

“Down you go,” he instructed.

Once Keegan and Noah dismounted, he began the transformation back into a man, gritting his teeth as the magic washed through him, stretching muscles and realigning bones.

With the process complete, he knelt on the cold ground, filthy, sore, but still alive.

Before he could summon the energy to move, he found his lap full of a very concerned mate.

Keegan caressed his face, his neck, his shoulders, the touch investigatory rather than comforting as he inspected every inch of Rune’s body.

Finding him whole and mostly unscathed, his lips turned down at the corners, and he smacked his hand against Rune’s bare chest.

“You scared the hell out of me,” he snapped.

Rune couldn’t have pried the grin off his face if he tried.

“I love you, kaelaer. ”

Keegan sighed, the fight draining out of him as he wrapped his arms around Rune’s neck and collapsed into him.

“I love you, too, but don’t ever do something like that again.” His breath stuttered against the side of Rune’s neck.

“And don’t tell me to leave you. I won’t do that. I can’t.”

He couldn’t agree to that.

His mate’s safety and well-being would always be his priority, regardless of the consequences to himself.

So, instead of offering empty promises or pretty lies, he clutched Keegan closer, holding him, grounding him in the moment.

A young woman with soulful eyes and dark hair approached them, holding out a stack of clothing.

Rune took the tee and cotton pants, they nodded at each other, and she walked away—no words needed.

The white T-shirt stretched tight across his chest and strangled his biceps, and the trousers fit snug in the thighs, but at least he was covered, which seemed to appease Keegan.

Dressed and finally on his feet, he took his mate’s hand and followed Noah through the crowd to the diner at the end of the dusty lane.

It still felt strange to see someone else behind the counter other than Cian, but not as strange as witnessing it bustling with activity.

People filled the tables and booths, while others stood by the stone fireplace, their heads tossed back in laughter or bent together in conversation.

This was what the village in his world should have been, and when they returned to the Underworld—because they would return—he hoped they carried this sense of community home with them.

Noah led them to the back corner, to the same booth where Rune had sat across from Orrin so many times.

Only this time, there was no prince dressed in absurdly lavish robes to greet him.

Just a group of strangers, two sets of identical twins like Keegan and his brother, all with matching tattoos burned into their forearms.

“Ah, you must be Keegan.”

“We’ve heard a lot about you.”

The first set of siblings—older men with balding white hair and lined faces—slid out of the booth to offer their hands in greeting.

“I’m Joseph. This is my brother John.”

Keegan nodded, his expression a mask of confusion and concern.

“I’d say it’s nice to meet you, but given the circumstances...”

The men laughed before stepping aside to make way for the other twins—young girls, probably no more than teenagers, with big brown eyes and warm smiles.

“I’m Lucia.”

“And I’m Carmen.”

“Well, you seem to already know who I am.” Keegan glanced up at him, then back to the group.

“This is my mate, Rune.”

“Oh, damn, congrats,” Noah interjected.

“I mean, I kind of guessed, but I wasn’t sure.” Then he turned to the others and added, “Rune is alive.”

Rune didn’t know why that mattered, but he detected something in Noah’s tone, a weightiness to his words that instantly sparked suspicion.

Especially when the others reacted with flared eyes or quiet nods.

It was just that, though—suspicion.

So, until he knew more, he decided to keep his thoughts to himself.

With introductions out of the way, Rune helped Joseph grab a couple of barstools from the counter, and they all gathered around the table.

The older men opted for the stools, leaving Rune to crowd into one side of the booth with his mate and Noah across from the sisters.

“I’m sure you have questions,” John said to start the conversation.

Keegan leaned into Rune’s side with a self-deprecating chuckle.

“Only a few. Mostly, I just want to know why this happened to us.”

“Mostly greed, son. I know that’s probably not the answer you want to hear, but that’s the truth.”

Rune had little knowledge or understanding of the circumstances that had led to Keegan’s death, and as such, no input to add to the conversation.

Instead, he cuddled his mate, lending comfort and support while he absorbed the information being given.

“Brie was trafficking souls from the Underworld,” Noah explained.

“She would bind them to the mortal world and sell them on the magical black market to be used in different spells and rituals.”

“And she made a pretty penny doing it,” Joseph added.

Rune frowned. Clearly, this hadn’t been a one-off incident, either.

The female must have been doing it for years, right under his nose, and he hadn’t even realized it.

He thought back to all the times someone had disappeared from the village, and how it had always been explained away with the assumption that they had crossed the river.

Keegan shuddered beside him.

“And this place? This world?”

“It’s like a passageway between realms or dimensions.” Carmen waved her hand dismissively.

“Whatever you want to call them.”

“We don’t know all the details,” Joseph continued.

“I can tell you that Brie is human, though, and she stole the magic she used to tether us.”

“But why?” His mate’s voice was small, unsure, but ringing with indignation.

“What did she need us for?”

“The ritual she used to open the doorways between worlds requires anchors.” Leaning forward, John rested his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands together.

“Think of it like a lock and key.”

“Two parts of a whole,” Noah expounded.

“Identical twins.”

“But one from each world. One dead.” Joseph lifted his hand as he spoke, a wry smile on his lips.

“Heart attack.”

Lucia raised her hand next.

“Drowned.”

Then Noah.

“Car wreck.”

“And one living,” Joseph concluded.

John and Lucia raised their hands, their eyes on Keegan, who, after a moment of hesitation, lifted his as well.

“But the magic is like an infection. It drains the living twin until there’s nothing left.” Lucia sighed, her eyes glazed with memory.

Her sister’s mouth thinned with unveiled hatred.

“Then she traps us here to hide the evidence and moves on to the next victims.”

“Not all,” John argued.

“Some people she sold on the black market. I’d rather be here.”

Lucia shivered again.

“Good point.”

“The female was dragged through the portal,” Rune said, speaking for the first time.

He wouldn’t use her name, though.

He wouldn't give her identity.

"What happened to her?"

"Oh, she's still here." Turning his head, Noah glanced through the window, to the space behind the diner where the light didn't touch.

"She didn't survive the blowback when you cut the puppet strings, but her soul came through the portal like the rest of us." His eyes narrowed, and his nostrils flared.

"She hides in the blackness, in the places too dark for even the shadows to penetrate."

Because while shadows couldn't exist in the light, neither could they exist in the total absence of it.

"We catch glimpses of her sometimes," Carmen added, her upper lip curling.

"She knows better than to get too close, but she watches."

"Oh, god," Keegan breathed.

"I just thought..." He trailed off and shook his head.

"I don't know what I thought, but this is so much worse."

It was a horrific tale that made Rune's blood boil, but it didn't answer the most pressing question.

How the hell did they get out of there?

From what he was hearing, the doorways could only be opened with a spell, but they

had no talismans, no artifacts, no magic.

Moreover, the “lock and key” required to power the ritual no longer existed because every twin in the mirror world was already dead.

“So, there’s no way out?” he said, giving voice to his frustrations.

The strangers around the table glanced at each other, little knowing smiles curving their lips.

“We think there might be a way,” John said at last, his eyes focused on Keegan.

“Me?” Keegan yelped.

“What can I do?”

“I managed to undo the tether once,” Carmen said.

“It almost killed me.”

Rune arched an eyebrow.

“But it didn’t.”

“No. I survived.” She shook her head.

“And the tether reformed.”

Like the mirror ropes that had dragged his mate into this nightmare.

Shaking back the sleeve of his sweatshirt, Keegan held his arm up, tracing the scars

of magic across his skin.

“But you said the ritual needs a living twin.” His finger stopped on his palm where the line had been disconnected.

“I didn’t survive.”

“I didn’t know you had died when I first came through, but I knew your stubborn ass would try to find a way to save me.” Noah snorted.

“Idiot.”

Keegan huffed and shoved his brother sideways.

“But I am dead, so what’s your point?”

“But your mate isn’t.”

“I don’t have a twin,” Rune said, shaking his head.

“But you’re bonded to Keegan, right? You’ve claimed him?”

He frowned, still not understanding what the guy was trying to tell him.

“Yes, but I don’t see why that matters.”

“We’ve been here a long time,” Joseph said, raising his voice when Noah opened his mouth to argue.

“Some of us longer than others. During that time, we’ve had a lot of discussions about possible ways to leave this place.”

“When Noah arrived and told us his story, we had hoped that Keegan might be able to open a doorway from the other side.” Dropping his head, John rubbed the back of his neck and sighed.

“We knew it was a long shot, but...”

“Hope is hard to extinguish,” Rune finished for him.

“I still don’t understand what that has to do with me.”

“We were held captive longer than anyone else,” the older male responded, motioning between him and his brother.

“I was already old, weak, and the magic drained me within a couple of days.” He looked up then, his eyes red-rimmed and shimmering.

“But I left behind a mate. A different kind of tether, but a tether to the living, all the same.”

Rune sat up straighter, his back stiff and his heart pounding.

“And the spell kept working.”

“It wasn’t as strong. We could only hold the doorways open for short periods of time, but yes,” John confirmed.

“Until Jayna died.”

“I’m sorry for what happened to you.” Keegan leaned forward, peering at the older twins around his brother.

“And I want to get out of here as much as any of you, but Rune and I bonded days ago.” He held his hand up, showing the severed thread on his palm.

“It’s still just a scar.”

“It’s a tether,” Carmen told him, her tone mildly exasperated.

“A handshake. It ties at both ends.” She glanced at her sister from the corner of her eye.

“Ours reformed when Lucia took my hand.”

“Okay.” Though he sounded skeptical, and maybe a little annoyed, Keegan turned and reached for Noah’s hand.

“No!” four voices shouted in unison.

“Not here,” Joseph said.

“We need to prepare the others. When the doorway opens, we won’t have much time to get everyone through it.”

Reaching under the table, Keegan took Rune’s hand and gripped it tightly as he addressed the group.

“Do you really think this will work?”

Rune appreciated that no one rushed to give him false assurance because the truth was, none of them knew for certain.

It was a theory, a solid one rooted in experience, but still a theory.

A Hail Mary. One last hope of the desperate.

“Rune? What do you think?”

“I don’t know, kaelaer. ” He wished he had more comforting words, but he wouldn’t lie.

“But what other choice do we have?”

Chapter eleven

It had taken forever to round everyone up and gather them into the square around the bonfire.

Keegan had headed to the river with Rune to bring back the souls standing watch in the forest, leaving Noah behind to help in the village.

While not technically a two-person job, he hadn't argued when his mate had insisted that he come along.

Partly because the thought of being separated from the big Guardian terrified him.

What if the shadows returned?

What if Rune was hurt again?

Mostly, however, he had been relieved.

Staying meant actively trying to convince the entire village of something he didn't even know if he believed himself.

The plan seemed solid in theory—almost too easy—and the last time something had sounded too good to be true, he had ended up dead.

To be fair, he didn't think anything so dramatic would happen this time.

In fact, he mainly worried that nothing would happen at all, and in turn, he would end up disappointing everyone.

Because whether he wanted the responsibility or not, this wasn't just about him anymore.

Now, everyone was counting on him.

Standing in front of the diner with his mate and his brother, he turned away from the crowd, but he could still feel their eyes on him.

Worse, he could feel their hope, but instead of buoying him, it just made him queasy.

“What if this doesn't work?”

“Then we find another way,” Rune answered in the same offhanded way one might respond to being told the milk had gone bad.

“Everyone is expecting me to save them, but I have no idea what I'm doing. What if nothing happens?” Realizing that was probably the better option, he sighed and shook his head.

“What if I make it worse?”

“What if you don't?” his mate countered.

“Rune, I'm being serious.”

Cupping the side of Keegan's neck, Rune pressed a thumb under his chin, holding him in place as he bent to brush their lips together.

“So am I. If it doesn’t work, we’ll find another way.”

“How? They’ve been trying for years.”

“Yeah, but we have something they don’t.”

Keegan arched an eyebrow.

“If you say ‘love,’ I’m going to lose my lunch.”

From everyone else’s perspective, Rune probably looked a little deranged when he barked out a sharp laugh, but his eyes never left Keegan’s.

“Connections, kaelaer . We have connections. The way time works here, it might be weeks or years, but Orrin will notice we’re gone. Hades and Erus will return. Someone will come for us.”

He had completely forgotten that his mate had literal god-tier connections in the Underworld.

The soul-saving, portal-opening, world-splintering kind of connections.

Granted, he didn’t want to be trapped there for any length of time, but years sounded a hell of a lot better than eternity.

“In the meantime,” Rune continued, “let’s try to save ourselves.”

Pep talk received, and confidence bolstered—at least temporarily—Keegan took a deep breath and dipped his head.

He wasn’t their last hope.

He was just their only hope right then.

A small but important distinction that eased some of the pressure and lessened the heavy weight on his shoulders.

Still, when Joseph came to ask if he and Noah were ready, he couldn't look the older man in the eye.

He couldn't face the excitement mixed with expectation shining in his expression.

"We're ready," Noah answered for both of them.

Although John and Joseph had been trapped longer than the others, used as keys to open doorways between realms, even they didn't truly understand how it worked.

Rather, they had simply tried to recreate what they did know.

Brie had always used a mirror as a gateway, so they had brought a large, oval one from the apothecary and set it up in the town square.

"Don't we need some kind of incantation or something?" Keegan asked as he and his twin took their places in front of the mirror.

"Normally, yes, but the portal never fully closed." Noah glanced over his shoulder to the crowd gathered behind them.

"That's why it kept sucking souls through from the Underworld."

Keegan bobbed his head in acknowledgment.

"So, we're just trying to force it open wider."

“And reverse the flow.”

“Noah, if this doesn’t work—”

“It’ll work.”

“But if it doesn’t—”

“It’ll work.”

For fuck’s sake, he was surrounded by the most maddeningly optimistic bastards in the universe.

“Will you just shut up and let me apologize?”

“Apology accepted.”

Asshole.

“Okay, listen up!” Joseph called, getting everyone’s attention.

“If this works, the doorway will only be open for a few minutes. There will be time for everyone to make it through, but we have to be fast, and we have to be orderly.”

He received a bunch of nods and a few murmurs of agreement, but mostly, everyone appeared fixated on the mirror, and by extension, Keegan.

“Ready when you are, boys,” Joseph told them as he moved away to join the rest of the group.

Sighing, Keegan turned to face his twin, his pulse throbbing in his throat and blood

roaring in his ears.

“Sink or swim?”

Noah grinned, his eyes softening yet still blazing with determination.

“Sink or swim.”

Win, lose, or draw, they were in this together.

Arms bent in front of them, they clapped their palms together and held tight.

“You know, if we were really arm-wrestling, I’d totally win.”

Noah snorted.

“Not with those skinny ass arms.”

They waited, muscles tight and fingers flexing, but nothing happened.

Instead, they just stood there like a couple of dumbasses, holding hands and staring fiercely into each other’s eyes like the cover image for an MMA cage match.

His heart heavy with the weight of their failure, he tried to pull away, but Noah wouldn’t let him go.

“Wait,” he insisted.

“Just...wait.”

“Noah, we tried. It’s not working. We’re just not—”

They both hissed at the same time, their fingers curling reflexively and digging into the back of the other's hand.

The scars on their arms illuminated, spreading across their skin with a faint golden glow.

It danced and glittered, throwing its warm radiance across their faces as it raced in a circuit along the tangled lines.

In response, the mirror behind them began to vibrate, the glass rattling inside the ancient frame, and stark, blinding light pulsed from the center.

Swirling and spiraling, it grew, spreading as the doorway opened right before their eyes.

"We did it!" Noah exclaimed, dropping his hand and dragging him into a crushing hug.

"We really did it!"

The mirror shuddered and immediately went dark.

"Fuck," Keegan cursed.

"Quick, give me your hand again."

The moment their skin touched, the markings glowed, and the doorway cracked open again, small at first but growing in size and strength as they continued to grasp onto each other.

The crowd cheered, a celebration born of pure joy and soul-deep relief, and for the

first time, Keegan finally let himself share in their excitement.

“Don’t let go.”

It might not be how things had worked the first time around, but he didn’t care.

They were going home.

All of them.

Forearms twined, hands clasped, they moved to the side, clearing the way as Joseph, his twin, and Rune began ushering souls toward the portal.

But they had a problem.

The longer he and Noah held onto each other, the more it burned, the magic searing deeper into their skin.

Pain radiated up Keegan’s arm and across his chest, the lines slithering outward to encompass more of his body.

“Don’t let go,” Noah echoed back to him, his expression tight and his arm quivering.

“You can do this, kaelaer.” Rune’s voice floated into his mind, a balm to the flash burn that consumed him.

“Hold on just a little longer.”

Keegan clenched his jaw and tightened his hand around Noah’s with renewed resolve.

He could do this. He could burn for the people he cared about, for the souls who deserved better than this hollow, nightmare existence.

But beneath the pain, the fear, the joy and relief, he felt the tremor.

He sensed the magic growing more unstable, flickering at first, then throbbing, pounding out a warning.

“Hurry!” he shouted to his mate.

“Get them through!”

The mirror portal sparked, spitting out flares of golden light, drawing gasps of unease from the group, but they didn’t stop moving.

Their steps became a little quicker, a little jittery, but they continued to file through the doorway in small clusters.

With only a few groups remaining, the portal gave a violent shake, expelling a gust of wind that cut through the night like a blade, extinguishing every light in the village.

Even the bonfire died, the roaring flames reduced to smoldering embers, casting them in darkness apart from the circle of light that surrounded the mirror.

“Go, go, go!” Rune shouted, grabbing souls and shoving them toward the doorway.

“Hurry!”

The searing pain had reached Keegan’s neck now and had started crawling up the side of his jaw.

Noah didn't look to be fairing any better—eyes tight, his face a mask of pain and stubbornness.

“It's fine,” Noah panted.

“I mean, it could be worse.”

Keegan honestly didn't see how.

Then the clacking started.

Those who remained screamed and darted for the doorway, pushing and shoving at each other as they scrambled to be the first to go through.

The chittering grew louder, more frenzied, and shadows darted at the edge of his vision, amassing into a black cloud as it rolled across the ground.

“That's the last one, boys!” Joseph shouted.

“Let's get the hell out of here.”

Keegan turned his head, watching through blurred eyes as the older man disappeared through the wavering light.

Something moved in the darkness behind the mirror, a shadow but sharper, more defined, arms tucked as it sprinted toward them...

toward the gateway.

“It's her,” Noah gasped.

“It’s Brie! Don’t let her through.”

“How the fuck are we supposed to do that?” He wasn’t about to close the portal and trap himself just to stop her.

“She’s already dead. Let the Underworld sort her out.”

“You don’t know her. You don’t know what she’s capable of.”

He heard the fear mingled with the anger in his brother’s voice, felt his hatred burn as intensely as the magic that scorched across their skin.

“Let’s go,” Rune demanded, jogging up to them and shoving them toward the mirror.

“We can close it from the other side.”

He met Noah’s gaze, and they both nodded.

Hands still clasped, they turned and ran for the mirror, only to stumble to a stop when Brie careened around the edge of the light, stumbling into view and making a tight turn straight for the doorway.

She was fast...but Rune was faster.

Catching her by a fistful of her dry, stringy hair, he dragged her away from the light, his expression unchanged as she screamed and flailed.

“Let me go! You can’t do this! This isn’t right.”

“You have a lot of nerve lecturing me on right and wrong,” Rune responded, ice dripping from every word.

“You did this to yourself.”

Gone was the healthy, studious woman Keegan had met in a quiet coffee shop.

In her place was an aged, decrepit caricature of a human being.

Her cragged skin drooped, practically sliding off her face, her sunken eyes shadowed with deep bruises, and her gaze wide, mad.

“Rune, we have to go!” While it would be satisfying to list off every horrible thing about her, he didn’t know how much longer he could hold on.

“Let me go!” Brie screeched.

“I don’t have magic anymore. I can’t hurt anyone.”

“You never had magic,” Rune told her.

“You stole it, corrupted it, and used it to hurt a lot of innocent people. Where was your compassion then?”

“I’m sorry!”

“Rune!” Keegan begged.

“Please!”

“I didn’t know!” Brie sobbed.

“I didn’t know what I was doing. You have to believe me.”

“I don’t.” Turning on his heel, Rune marched to the edge of the light that encircled them.

“You wanted to play in the shadows?”

Then he tossed her forward into the darkness, her screams echoing behind him as he strode back toward the mirror.

Taking Keegan’s free hand, he stood straight and nodded.

“Don’t look back.”

And they didn’t, all three of them staring straight ahead as they stepped into the light.

Chapter twelve

Rune exhaled when his next step landed on the paved street that ran through the center of the village, the coldness of the stone seeping into the soles of his bare feet.

They had made it home.

The moment they were through, Keegan and Noah jerked apart, cradling their arms against their chests, both tired and hurting, but wearing identical smiles of triumph.

The doorway shimmered for a moment longer, its shape wobbling before it finally folded in on itself and disappeared.

Hopefully for good.

Those who had come through before them cheered, high-fiving and hugging each other in celebration.

“You did it.” Wrapping his arms around Keegan’s waist, Rune lifted him off his feet and spun him in a circle.

“You were incredible. I’m so fucking proud of you.”

“It was kind of a team effort, you know.” Noah tilted his head.

“I helped.”

Chuckling, Rune reached over and ruffled his hair.

“Yes, you did. You were both incredible.”

Noah smirked, his eyes dancing with mischief as he stared up at his brother.

“He likes me.”

“Actually, he thinks you’re hideous,” Keegan shot back, wrapping his arms around Rune’s neck.

“I am literally wearing your face.”

“Nope.” Leaning back, he looked at Rune with an arched eyebrow.

“Right?”

“Absolutely. Grotesque even.”

Noah dropped his head and grumbled under his breath.

“I hate you both.”

“I leave you alone for five fucking minutes.” Deep and resonating, the voice reverberated through the village, seemingly coming from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

Everyone quieted, backing away from the street and averting their gaze as Hades strode forward, Orrin and Erus following close behind.

Wearing a black leather jacket with spiked shoulders, his mane of silver hair blowing

behind him in a ghostly trail, he looked every bit the pissed-off god he was.

Lowering his mate to the ground, Rune stepped forward, shuffling Keegan behind him.

“Noah,” Keegan hissed.

“Get over here.”

Hands clasped in front of him, head bent, Noah shuffled his feet across the stones as he hurried to join his brother.

“Well?” Hades came to a stop in front of him and rested his hands on his hips, parting the front of his jacket to reveal a bare chest covered in colorful ink.

“Someone want to tell me what the fuck is going on around here?”

And by “someone,” he clearly meant Rune.

“Maybe it would be better if we took this conversation somewhere else,” Orrin suggested, forever the diplomat.

“We can go—”

Hades waved his hand, but instead of transporting them to the diner or the castle, everyone else on the street vanished.

“Talk,” he demanded.

“It’s my fault,” Keegan piped up.

Rune growled. “Quiet, kaelaer .”

“No, no, let the kid speak.” The god waved his hand again, and in the next heartbeat, Keegan materialized in front of him.

“Go on.”

Twisting his hands together, Keegan glanced over his shoulder before taking a deep breath and beginning his explanation.

“See, my brother died, and I didn’t get to say goodbye. Then I died, and Noah—that’s my brother—got sucked into a mirror. But Hades—that’s you—was gone, so we didn’t know how to get him back. Then I got sucked into a mirror, which I do not recommend.”

Rune resisted the urge to look away from the train wreck as he swallowed back a groan.

His mate was clearly nervous, which he had sympathy for, but that had to be the most incoherent babble he’d ever heard.

“How am I doing?” Even Keegan’s inner voice shook as it floated into Rune’s mind.

“Maybe skip to the end.”

“We found some more souls,” Keegan continued, speaking faster, the words tumbling one over the other.

“Then we figured out how to open another portal, and Rune fed that crazy bitch to some shadow monsters.”

This time, Rune did groan.

Really, though, he had no one to blame but himself.

He'd said to skip to the end of the story, and his mate had certainly accomplished that.

Any embarrassment or anxiety he felt, however, vanished like smoke when Hades reached out to grip Keegan's jaw, forcing his head to the side.

His upper lip pulled back from his teeth, a warning growl rolling in his chest as he took a step forward.

The god's head shot up, his obsidian eyes locked on Rune and blazing with fire.

He didn't speak. He didn't have to.

That one look alone had halted Rune in his tracks.

Once Hades had finished examining Keegan, he dropped his hand and cocked his head to the side.

"You," he called. "2.0. Come here."

"Me?" Noah squeaked, still hiding behind Rune's back.

Then he, too, vanished, only to rematerialize beside his twin.

"Now, let me see if I have this straight." Linking his fingers together behind his back, Hades began to pace, glancing at the twins from the corner of his eye occasionally.

“A human female stole magic and used it to break into my house so she could traffic souls to sell on the black market.”

Rune sighed.

So, he already knew the whole story.

The asshole just enjoyed the theatrics.

Pausing mid-stride, Hades looked over at him with an arched eyebrow, a subtle reminder that the god could hear his every thought.

Not usually a big deal, but at the moment, his mind wasn't the most charitable place to be.

Smirking, Hades lowered his head again and resumed his pacing, continuing his monologue as if the interruption hadn't occurred.

“Being the resourceful gentlemen that you are, you two managed to save the day by opening a doorway between the primordial void and the Underworld.”

“Um, yes?” Noah responded, his voice lilting at the end.

“And now the female is dead.”

“Very dead,” Keegan confirmed with a nod.

Hades came to a stop in front of the pair.

“How did you open the rift between the realms? Show me.”

The twins seemed less than thrilled about the command, their bodies tense and radiating with nerves.

But when the King of the Underworld gave an order, no one argued.

Facing each other, they locked hands, jolting when the magic flared through the tether once more.

Despite the lack of a mirror or any other reflective surface, the air next to Rune shimmered and swirled, crackling as it emitted golden sparks from seemingly nowhere.

“That’s enough,” Hades said, his voice quiet, thoughtful.

The twins let go of each other with a pained grunt and stumbled back a step.

The air stilled, the spark vanished, and everything returned to normal.

Yet, the demonstration confirmed what Rune had already suspected.

The rift might be closed, but it wasn’t sealed.

Keegan must have realized what it meant as well because he said, “We promise we will never, ever open another doorway into the void.”

“No,” Hades agreed.

“You won’t.”

Rune tensed when he reached into the inside pocket of his jacket, but instead of divine retribution, he removed a sanded stick with colorful, braided thread tied to

each end.

Though he had never seen it personally, he guessed it to be the talisman the female had used to tether the brothers in the first place.

“Correct,” Hades said without looking at him.

“And just what we need, I think.”

Pinching it in the middle between his thumb and index finger, he held it casually, the way one might balance a baton.

The result, however, was immediate.

The lines of magic etched into the brothers’ skin shimmered to life again, the light dim but growing brighter as it reacted to Hades’ summons.

Like sand scattered by the wind, the scars disintegrated, bleeding off their bodies in a stream of golden light that flowed into the relic.

It was over in a moment, leaving both males staring at their hands in disbelief.

“That should do it.” With a satisfied smile, the god tucked the stick—now carved in ancient sigils and alight with dark enchantments—back into his pocket.

“Now, go away.”

“Yes, sir.” Noah bobbed his head enthusiastically as he backed away, pulling Keegan with him.

“Thank you.”

“Yes,” Keegan agreed.

“Thank you.”

But Hades was already gone.

“Holy shit,” Keegan breathed.

“I totally thought we were going to die. Again.”

Orrin strode forward then, a bright smile lighting his face.

“Welcome back.”

“Good to be back.” Joining his mate, Rune wound an arm around him, pulling him close.

“How long were we gone?”

“Not long.” He smiled sheepishly.

“I’m sorry. I honestly didn’t even notice until a hole opened up in the sky, and souls started spilling into the street.”

“That’s understandable, asteraki .” Erus smoothed back the prince’s silvery hair and leaned in to press a kiss to the side of his neck.

“No need to apologize. You were...otherwise occupied.”

Orrin’s cheeks reddened, his expression scandalized as he smacked his hand against his mate’s arm.

“Erus!”

While Rune didn’t begrudge their flirting, he was tired, both mentally and physically.

He needed a shower, a nap, and food in no particular order.

“Come on, kaelaer . Let’s go home.”

“Yes, please.”

“I’m going to head to my apartment,” Noah said, backing away and angling toward the Tower.

Keegan stiffened. “What? Why?”

“Because I’m exhausted, and I have a feeling you’re going to be—” His gaze flickered from Orrin to Rune, a crooked smile curving one side of his mouth.

“— otherwise occupied. Don’t worry, I’m not going to disappear.” Grabbing his brother’s shoulder, he pulled him into a brief but tight hug.

“I’ll see you in the morning, okay?”

Though obviously reluctant, Keegan nodded.

“Okay. I’ll see you in the morning.”

They parted ways there in the street, Noah heading in the direction of the high-rise while Orrin teleported the rest of them to the front steps of the castle.

Although he had the ability to phase them directly into the foyer, kitchen, or even

their own rooms, he never did.

Something about it being bad manners.

With a muttered thanks, Rune pushed the door open, pulling Keegan behind him as they trudged through the corridors to their room.

Neither of them spoke as they undressed and stepped into the shower together, their experiences in the mirror world still too fresh to pretend everything was fine.

Nor did they speak as they scrubbed each other clean beneath the spray of hot water, washing away bad memories along with the dirt and blood.

Afterwards, they tumbled into bed, coming together gently with soft touches and tender kisses.

There was no urgency or desperation, no frenzied hands or growled commands.

This time, it wasn't about unfettered desire, but about connection, a reclamation of what they had almost lost. They moved as one, their bodies in perfect sync, staring into each other's eyes as they fell over the edge together with quiet moans and contented sighs.

Even after the high faded, they clung to each other.

Wrapped in a tangle of limbs, they drifted to sleep, secure in the knowledge that not even death had been able to keep them apart.

If they could stare into the mouth of the void and come out on the other side, they could face anything. Together.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:07 am

Six months later...

It had taken a couple of weeks for the shock of what had happened to wear off, but eventually, afterlife in the Underworld had returned to normal.

Not surprisingly, the twins they had rescued from the mirror world had found the quaint village to be an uncomfortable reminder rather than a source of solace.

As such, they had chosen to cross the river pretty early on, and Keegan couldn't say he blamed them.

Noah, however, had opted to stay, and he hadn't fully worked out how he felt about that.

While his brother had insisted that he had his own reasons that didn't involve Keegan, he didn't know if he believed him.

At least, not entirely.

Naturally, he hated the idea of them never seeing each other again, but more than that, he wanted Noah to be happy.

Seeing his distress, Rune had offered to cross with him, removing the burden of having to choose between the two people he loved most in the world.

Unfortunately, that solution had come with its own set of complications.

Namely the fact that Hades himself had expressly forbidden any of the Guardians from crossing the river while they still lived.

Keegan had only met the god the one time, and that had been more than enough.

Despite his mate's claims to the contrary, he was pretty sure he'd been about two seconds away from being smited into oblivion, which was not an experience he wished to repeat.

And breaking Hades one rule seemed like a surefire way to piss him all the way off.

Besides, he had a pretty good thing going in the village.

Miss Helen let him help out at the bakery.

Cian had reluctantly agreed to let him wait tables on occasion.

Much to Rune's displeasure, Geoffery had been teaching him how to throw knives.

He hadn't stabbed himself once.

Nicks on his fingers didn't count, no matter what his overprotective mate said.

A couple of times a week, he met with Paris for a drink—or four—at the tavern.

Though, he had to admit his favorite part of those nights was when Rune showed up to give him a piggyback ride home.

Mostly, however, he spent his days helping Rune manage the day-to-day business of the village.

Instead of having the residents come directly to his mate with their grievances,

Keegan had encouraged him to set up “suggestion” boxes in both the Tower and at the diner.

It had worked surprisingly well, and it kept Rune from being dragged into unreasonable arguments with people who wanted an immediate solution to their problems.

Once a week, Keegan collected the slips of parchment, inputted them into a spreadsheet on Rune’s tablet, and categorized them by type and priority.

There were the typical complaints, of course, like noisy neighbors and foul smells, but he had been seeing more and more actual suggestions for improving the village.

Sadly, not all of them were practical...

or even possible. Real streetlamps instead of hanging lanterns, for example.

Rune had no control over the infrastructure, and he couldn’t just create electricity out of nothing.

Sometimes, like now, he even helped mediate petty squabbles between the residents in the Tower while his mate oversaw the supply drop at the pier.

And he hated it. Frankly, he had no idea how Rune did it without losing his mind.

Today, the issue stemmed from Sergei, the resident curmudgeon of the eighth floor, who had decided—again—that only he could access the middle elevator.

This time, however, he had taken it a step further.

In an act of defiance, protest, or lunacy, he had relocated his entire bedroom into the cab of the lift.

If that hadn't been bad enough, the Tower, being the passive aggressive, semi-sentient asshole it was, had responded in kind.

Instead of just booting him from the cab, however, it had trapped him behind a collapsable metal gate, refusing to let him leave.

Then it had spent the past several hours in constant movement, carrying him between the different floors at terrifying speeds.

The one saving grace to the situation was that the building actually seemed to like Keegan, so when he had arrived, Sergei had been waiting in the lobby.

Still trapped, still angry, but easily accessible.

"This damn thing is possessed!" he shouted through the metal lattice.

Well, he couldn't argue with that.

"Then why did you piss it off?"

"I'm protecting my property."

Keegan rubbed a hand over his face and sighed.

The male's hair had just started to gray at the temples before his death, and he had a ruddy, rugged face that spoke of a hard life before the end.

A life in which he'd probably been forced to fight for every scrap he owned.

Keegan could understand.

He could even sympathize.

At the same time, it had been thousands of years.

Thousands of opportunities to grow and adapt.

“You don’t even leave the Tower,” Keegan reasoned.

“Why do you need an entire elevator to yourself?”

“It’s the principle.”

“What principle?”

“I had it first.”

Keegan didn’t even know what the fuck that meant.

“You were the first one to use the elevator?”

Sergei nodded.

“This one. It wasn’t here before I arrived.”

Instead of immediately dismissing him, Keegan pressed his lips together and tried to work out the logic.

Hades had erected the high-rise as a home for the souls of the Underworld—for altruistic reasons or because tents on the riverbank were ruining the aesthetics, no one knew.

The first residents had died long before humanity had any concept of electricity, let alone modern conveniences like elevators.

To them, the lifts must have seemed like nothing more than a magic box that transported them home.

And technically speaking, they weren't wrong.

Following that thread, it stood to reason that since the elevator had appeared upon Sergei's arrival—likely an expansion to facilitate the growing population—he had believed it was made specifically for him.

"I understand," he said, partly to Sergei, but mostly to himself.

He racked his brain, trying to find the words to appeal to the man's way of thinking.

"Since you don't really use it, though, it kind of seems like a waste, don't you think?"

"It's not a waste."

"Then what would you call it? There are already so few resources. Shouldn't people use and appreciate what's available to them?"

"Yeah...well...I suppose that's right."

It wasn't a full agreement, but his defensive posture relaxed, and something flickered in his eyes, a spark of uncertainty, maybe.

"I agree that this elevator cab is yours, but as a founding member of the community, wouldn't it be better to lead by example?"

"I'm no leader."

But Keegan could see the idea appealed to him, so he pressed on.

“How about this? What if you allowed people to use your elevator? It’s still there when you need it, but we won’t be wasting or neglecting resources. How does that sound?”

Sergei studied him for a long time before asking, “It’s still mine?”

“Absolutely, and you’d be doing everyone a huge favor by letting them borrow it sometimes.”

The guy finally relented with a decisive nod.

“I guess that would be okay.”

“We are in your debt, sir.”

With that, the gate disappeared, the doors closed, and the elevator rolled away, presumably to return Sergei to his eighth-floor unit.

Shaking his head at the ridiculousness, Keegan turned toward the lobby exit, freezing when he realized he had an audience.

Rune leaned against the wall, his arms folded over his chest and a grin stretching his mouth.

“How long have you been there?”

Rune pushed upright with a shrug.

“A while.”

“And you couldn’t have helped?”

“Why would I?” he asked, coming to join him by the lifts.

“You handled it just fine on your own.”

His chest swelled with pride, and a beaming smile curved his lips.

“I did, didn’t I?”

Rune chuckled at him.

“You did good, kid.”

“What’s my reward?” he teased.

Grabbing him by the front of his sweater, Rune jerked him close, then spun them around, pressing Keegan’s back against the doors of the elevator.

It was swift, fluid, and sexy as hell.

“What do you want, kaelaer ?”

His stomach tightened with need, and desire pooled in his groin, his cock instantly swelling behind the zipper of his jeans.

The sudden onslaught of carnality short-circuited his brain, burning away reason and decorum.

So, instead of some flirty quip, he blurted out the unfiltered truth.

“A flat surface and a little privacy.”

The doors behind him parted without warning, and he stumbled into the cab, Rune

following, anchoring him against the glass wall.

“What else?” Rune asked, a touch of a growl in his voice.

Keegan shivered as he arched up on his toes to bring their lips together.

There really was only one reasonable response to such a loaded question.

“Everything,” he breathed.

“I want everything.”

Then Rune captured his mouth—hungry, dominant, possessive—reminding him that he already had it.